"The kiss of love
from one soul to another
creates colours
you never knew existed."

Kiss Aesthetic *by* ZerefSerigala

Letter from the Editor

"I think it's a cool idea!"

Those were the words on my screen on that fateful day in October 2018. I stared at them for a long moment, wondering what I should reply with.

GrayZa Week 2018 had wrapped up a couple of months ago, with paltry participation at best. The fans, once so vocal, had silently moved on to greener pastures. Not that they could be blamed. Canon material was non-existent, and the canon shippers had won their wars. There were a few artists and writers left, but there was no audience. Creating for the sake of creating is fun, but what's the point if there's nobody to witness it?

And that was my problem. Fans weren't even enthusiastic about GrayZa Week. Few fans, and fewer creators, had assured that. Who would read a fanzine, I thought. Even more pressing, who would create content for it? Who yet remained?

It was in August 2018 that I had decided to leave the fandom. It would be my last GrayZa week. And it was. I was moving on, too. But that one message arrested me.

The sheer, boundless hope and optimism contained in that short sentence shone through brilliantly. And, despite myself, I sat there considering how we could make it work.

It was just a vague idea at that point. Something Caitlin and I had thrown around in chats for the whole year. A fanzine. For artists and writers. Free to download and enjoy. A last hurrah for outbound shippers, a final celebration of the ship.

And I had to agree: it *was* a cool idea. If it could happen... well, it'd be pretty awesome.

It'd be a lot of work, though. Reaching out to as many shippers as possible – both past and present, helping people through the creation period, making sure every piece had a place and was the best it could be, etc.

And it was. It was difficult, but it was a team effort. Every single person who showed interest, took the time to read it, make art, write stories, helped edit, consulted, planned – this zine belongs to all of you. All of us. It belongs to GrayZa.

But everything began in October with that one sentence. From vague idea to a labour of love, we've all come a long, long way. All it takes is one person to dream it up and a couple dozen to support it.

Knowing what I know now, however, I wouldn't have hesitated at all in October when I responded with, "Fuck it, let's do it."

Not for a heartbeat.

- WolFang1011

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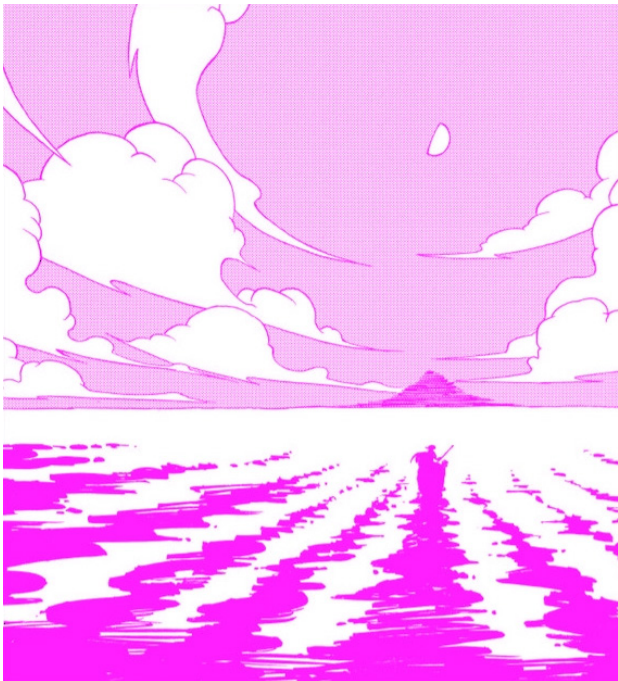


by Seicchan

Happy Birthday

by CeruleanShockwave

"Happy birthday!" shouted the entirety of Fairy Tail, a pleasing mishmash of earnest voices, as Gray bent over the cake to blow the thirteen candles out.

Thirteen. He was thirteen today.

And for the first time since he'd joined Fairy Tail, he didn't think about how much he wanted his parents or Ur and Lyon to be here. Because Gray had decided: if he was going to have a fresh start and a new family, he wouldn't regret not having his old one; he'd simply remember them in the best light possible and love his new family, every bit of it.

Even Erza, he thought with a little smile as he cut a large piece of cake for Natsu. She was strong, pretty, and brave, and after that day by the riverside they'd suddenly become joined at the hip. She had even taught him how to use a sword when he showed her excitedly that he'd figured out how to mould one.

Speaking of Erza… where *was* she? Gray hadn't seen her all morning — and it was his *birthday*, too! She didn't get to disappear on birthdays: It was the rule Erza herself had made after all. She took birthdays *very* seriously.

He stared around the guild hall, then sighed in defeat when he glimpsed no flash of red hair. Maybe she was fighting with Mirajane, or something.

"Happy birthday, Gray!" cheered Lisanna, running up to him and nearly making him choke on the cake he was eating. "Here's your present!"

Gray smiled at the bubbly girl, wanting to do nothing more than find Erza, but for courtesy's sake he accepted her gift and unwrapped the large box. It was a stuffed toy, as expected of Lisanna; a plushie polar bear, the likes of which he hadn't seen since he moved down to Fiore with its unbearably warm climate and strange tropical wildlife. He smiled in pleasant surprise.

"Thanks, Lisanna."

"I hoped it would remind you of home," she informed him, blue eyes wide with anticipation.

Gray nodded, smiling once more. "It does. It's a very thoughtful gift, thank you."

"You're welcome, Gray!" She hugged him and then she was gone, off to torment Natsu probably. Kids of that age… always so hyperactive.

(Gray peacefully ignored the fact that he, too, had been twelve until about ten hours ago.)

He patted the bear gently on its head, packing it back neatly into the box – he hated to waste perfectly good wrapping paper, unlike Erza, who just tore presents open like a rabid animal.

That's right — I was looking for Erza. Where is she?

Gray craned his neck anxiously, looking for the swordswoman above the sea of variously-coloured heads that swam around in the guild. He jumped onto the table, earning a "Watch it!" from Cana, whose cards he'd scattered everywhere in the process of the jump, but could spot no red in the crowd.

"Damn it, Erza," he muttered under his breath. "It's my birthday. You can't just not show up."

He couldn't deny the feeling of despair when he considered she might have forgotten, or the pit in his stomach as he realised maybe he wasn't as important to her as she was to him.

Suddenly, Gray's good mood was gone. He sat down quietly on the bench, staring down at his own unfinished cake with a fallen face.

"What's up with that?" asked Macao, plopping himself down next to Gray. "Why are you moping, birthday boy?"

"It's nothing," Gray mumbled glumly. "Just… Erza isn't here."

"Oh," Macao raised his eyebrows and smiled. "The two of you are good friends, right?"

"Yeah. I guess so."

"If you think she forgot, think again. Erza isn't that kind of girl; you know how seriously she takes things like these." Macao told Gray. "Cheer up – I bet she's just preparing you a great present. Remember what she got for Natsu?"

Gray smiled as he remembered Natsu's birthday present from Erza. It had been a machine that spit out images of anything the user asked it for, including memories of their own past. Natsu had, of course, immediately asked for Igneel — and lo and behold, an enormous fire dragon came roaring out, grinning at everyone in the guild. It was the first time that

they had all realised, seeing Natsu's smile, how much that the dragon had meant to him. He'd hugged Erza, crying and thanking her for her thoughtfulness.

Her other gifts had been no less thoughtful. A beautiful photo album and picture repairing spell for Mirajane who often stared sadly at the crumbling photographs of her parents; a parakeet for Elfman who adored birds but couldn't afford one; a silver chain for Cana to hang her mother's ring on; his own gift last year, his favourite meal from home which she'd taken many pains (literally and figuratively, since her fingers were covered in cuts) to prepare.

Of course she wouldn't forget Gray's birthday! How silly he'd been to think like that. Erza was kind and thoughtful; most likely she was just putting her full effort into his gift and wanting to give it the last perfect touches.

He grinned, suddenly much more cheerful. He couldn't *wait* to see what Erza was getting him.

And if he was being honest, he couldn't wait to see *her*, either.

A few hours later, though, and his good mood was close to vanishing once more. She *still* wasn't here, and almost half the day was gone!

"Hap-fy birf-dae, Guway," mumbled Natsu through more mouthfuls of cake, shoving a small box at Gray, who took it with a little disgust on seeing the crumbs of cake spewed all over it. It contained a silver bangle – the very one he'd been eyeing a week ago owing to the fact that it looked like what his father had owned.

He looked up at Natsu, who shrugged bashfully. "I saw you looking at it."

Gray's heart warmed a little, and he smiled at the Dragon Slayer. "Thanks, Natsu. I appreciate it."

"You're welcome," Natsu said happily, seemingly pleased that his gift had struck a chord with Gray, and skipped off to pig out some more.

Gray slipped the bangle on, not worried about losing it since he only ever took off his clothes, not his ornaments. He admired it on his wrist for a minute before climbing back onto the table and starting the search again.

"Looking for Erza?" called a smug voice, but Gray didn't care about that right now. He turned around and flailed desperately to get off the table, huffing when he finally landed on the floor and looking at the owner of the voice — one Mirajane Strauss, currently smirking down at him.

"Have you seen her?" he asked. "I've been looking for her all morning, but she hasn't shown up."

"Why, worried about your girlfriend?" Mirajane teased. Gray flushed darker than a tomato.

"She's not my girlfriend!" he hissed furiously.

"Not yet, but it's going to happen sooner or later," Mira shrugged, smiling wickedly. "Anyways, she asked me to tell you she'll give you your gift at noon precisely. She says she's sorry, but that the timing of her present *has* to be perfect."

Gray glanced up at the clock — 11:50.

"Ten minutes, then," he said, trying to come off as cool. "That's fine. Thanks, Mira."

Mira ruffled his hair and handed him her

present. "Happy birthday, kiddo."

Gray opened it carefully, staring at what was inside with more than a little shock. Mirajane had got him *eyeliner*, of all the things, and he winced after making sure she wasn't around. When the *hell* would he ever even wear eyeliner?!

(Many years later, Gray would slick on the same eyeliner to most fancy events because, in the words of Erza, "it makes your eyes pop.")

He lifted his eyes back to the clock: 11:55. Time seemed to be moving agonizingly slow, and it made Gray tingle with excitement and irritation.

"Come on, come on," he murmured under his breath, staring up at the clock and willing the hands to move faster.

"Gray!" came a low but sweet and beautifully familiar voice, and Gray looked up in shock to see the very person he'd been waiting for all morning standing before him with a radiant smile.

Erza crushed Gray to her chest in a tight hug which he didn't mind for once and all but shouted, "Happy birthday!"

"Thanks — erg — I can't breathe," he choked out.

Erza released him, blushing from the neck up, though Gray didn't know what for. "Sorry. Anyways, come out. I have to give you your present at noon exactly!"

Gray cocked a confused eyebrow but followed his friend out of the guild, waiting as she stopped and turned him around to face her.

Erza reached a hand into her pocket and drew out a necklace with a sword pendant hanging off the end, cheeks darkening even more. She stepped forwards, unhooking the chain, and beckoned for Gray to come forwards. He obliged, and she gently placed it around his neck. Her fingers brushed softly against his nape as she hooked the clasp, and was it just him or did she linger for a split second? Gray blushed at the thought.

"This belonged to the man who took care of me back in my village," Erza said quietly, blush gone and looking directly into Gray's eyes. "He gave it to me one day and told me to put it around the neck of the person who… meant the most to me."

Gray was stunned into silence.

I mean… the most… to Erza?

"Me?" he choked out in a strangled voice.

Erza nodded, cheeks dusted with pink once more.

"Yes, Gray. You."

Gray couldn't help the tears that gathered in the corners of his eyes. He blinked them away and swept Erza into a tight hug.

"Thank you," he whispered. "You mean the most to me, too."

Erza extricated herself from the hug and smiled softly. It was the most beautiful smile Gray had ever seen.

"I have another present for you," she whispered, her cheeks going pink once more. "Come closer."

Gray complied quietly, face heating up a little. He didn't know what Erza was going to give him, but he was looking forward to it. He didn't think anything could top this thoughtful and touching gift, though knowing Erza it probably would.

In one smooth motion, Erza placed her hand on his nape and tilted his face towards hers.

"Happy birthday, Gray," she whispered, placing a kiss on his cheek just as the noon bell rang throughout Magnolia.

Gray went bright red as Erza stepped back.

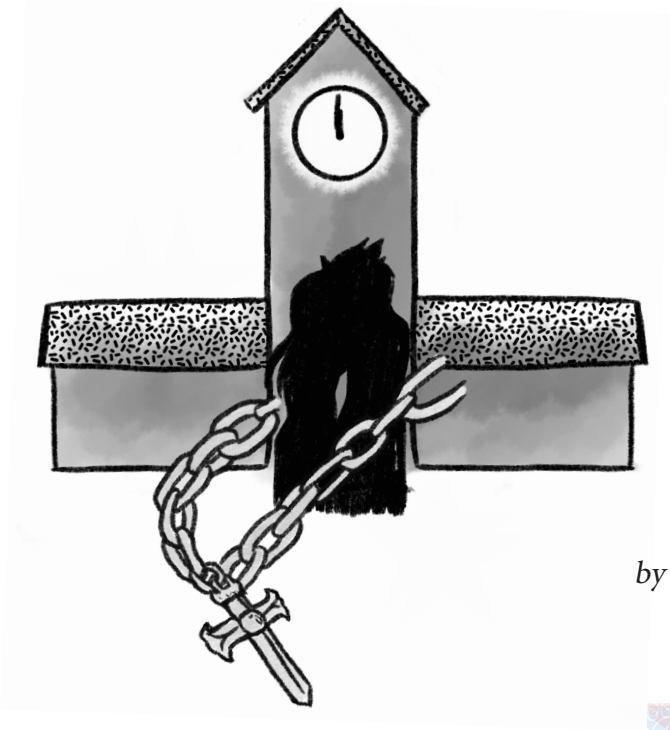
"I — you —" he stuttered.

"Back home, it's good luck to give a kiss at noon," she said with a little smile. "And I thought it would be a nice gesture. To share some of myself from the village with you."

Gray nodded dumbly, watching as Erza skipped back off into the guild, seemingly pleased with his reaction.

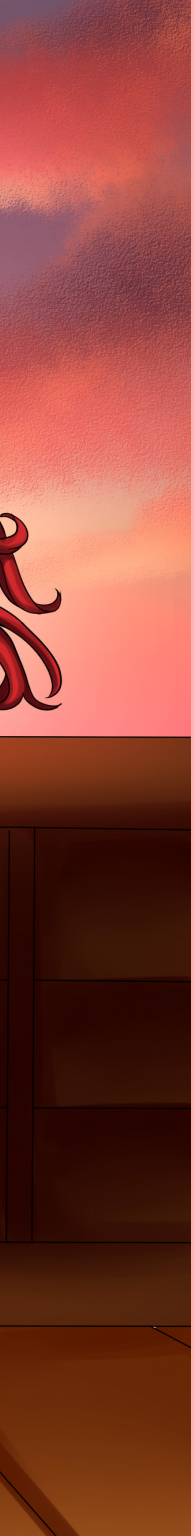
A smile bloomed on his face as he followed her.

It really was the best gift, he thought to himself, fingers grazing the necklace. *Thanks, Erza*.



by prestocrayon

by Sou



Cherished

by Artku

He is laughing. The firelight burnishes his hair bronze and he is chatting and drinking and laughing. She knows he is pretending. She can see the strain around his eyes, the grief of the unshed tears yet to come. Her heart aches for him. When the demon girl leads him to the space between the refectory tables, having finally coerced him into a dance he was too polite to refuse, she steps forward. The movement is small, but he notices. He always notices her. They look at each other for a spare second before she turns away, heading away from the circle of huts. A hastily mumbled excuse later he is with her.

The silvered grass in the forest looks as sharp as her blades. Erza almost expects it to crunch underfoot when she steps close to him. She traces the cut on his temple, its position giving him a rakish appearance. The muscles in his abdomen jump when she touches the wound in his side, and she whisks her hand away swiftly. "I heard you tried to use Iced Shell."

He does not respond but she can see the shame that puckers his brow. She wonders if he knows how unhappy she would be if he was no longer around. "Try it again and I'll kill you myself." The look on his face tells her he does.

He had revealed himself to her that day. She remembers the strength in his eyes as he caught her sword, how he did not flinch as the blade dug into his skin. The drops of blood that had fallen to the floor were as dark as his determination. Their guild mark stands proudly against his pale skin. The same mark he had held her sword to, as if to say, cut it out. Cut out my heart, my family. He would do this, even if it meant losing everything. Losing her. In that moment, she knew him. He had revealed himself

to her. Revealed the hurt that had transmuted into steely resolve.

"Cut me down if you want," he had said as he had left the tent. His body had been banged up but he had wanted to fight on. Until he was broken and battered and there was nothing left of him. The set of his shoulders saying, 'This is something only I can do. Damn the consequences.'

She understands the feeling. And fears it. One day she too must reckon with her past.

Her face is reflected in his dark eyes. They seem to know her too. Who she is and who she will be. She knows then, that maybe, just maybe, she can reveal herself to him in turn. That she will not be met with judgement.

With trembling fingers, she undoes the gauntlet on her left hand, pulling it off and throwing it to the ground. It is so quiet in the clearing that she hears his heart skip a beat. His lips part, as if he wants to say something but is afraid that by speaking, he will shatter the moment.

Her right gauntlet clinks as it joins its pair. Her nerves are jangling so forcefully that she is almost surprised they have not burst out of her body in a bid for freedom. She feels exposed. More clinking as a vambrace is removed. She can requip her armour off in a flash, but this… it is symbolic. She is inviting him into her world. Showing herself to him in a way that no one has seen her for a long time. The way he had shown himself to her.

The second vambrace drops and her hands are shaking too much to carry on. He moves to her, his hands gently stilling her quivering body. With aching tenderness, he unstraps the couter on her elbow, his eyes never leaving hers, checking all the while if she is OK. She nods at him. This was harder than she had thought it would be. His eyes tell her that he understands. That he recognises what a privilege this is. What an honour. They tell her that he will take his time doing it, because he wants this moment to last forever.

The couters, the spaulders, the faulds around her waist, they all come off. He piles them carefully on the ground, almost as if he is building a shrine to her. Who she had been before this night. Who she had been to him. A person walled off and hiding; someone untouchable. He reaches around her to undo the steel culet at the small of her back and she shivers, the gentleness of his touch sending diamonds skittering along her skin. When at last the gorget from around her narrow neck is on the ground and only her cuirass remains, she stays his hand. She swallows the lump in her throat almost violently and pulls off the final plate of her armour.

Her hands fist at her side and she fights the instinct to try to cover herself. Standing there, clad in only a black t-shirt and her navy skirt, she feels naked. A warm hand slides across her cheek to cup her face; it makes her forget to fidget.

The look in his eyes both thrills and frightens her and his breath is warm and sweet as it mingles with hers. She is not sure if he says something then, but she reaches up and closes the gap between their lips anyway.

He kisses her like she is the most precious thing in his world. Like he will break if he had to leave her. His calloused fingers whisper a thousand secrets to her as they stroke her cheeks and tangle themselves in her hair.

When she tugs him towards the ground, he curses himself for not bringing a jacket and it makes her laugh. A small, cruel part of her wonders if she is laughing at him. At how much

he cares for her. How little she deserves it.

The grass under her bare thighs is as soft as his touch and it fills the air with the smell of summertime. He undresses her slowly, almost reverentially, his lips igniting tiny bonfires against her skin. And when he pulls off her heavy, unyielding boots and presses a kiss to the arch of her foot, her heart clenches because it, she, feels perfect.

His shins are strong under her as she undoes his belt and she has to stop for a moment to study him. The moonlight ripples glacially over his skin, dancing in and out of the shadows made by the grooves of his muscles. She thinks it is ironic; that his hard body looks as soft as buttercream and her soft skin looks as hard as marble and that maybe somewhere in between the irony is a deeper meaning that she does not care to think about. He pulls her to him and rolls them over and the thought is banished to the back of her mind.

She knows the words he will not speak. Words he knows that she is not ready to hear. That maybe she will never be ready to hear. But they spill out from behind closed lips anyway; in the way he cradles her face when he kisses her, the way he coaxes the moans from her fluttering lips, the way he worships her. Silk slides against silk as his hair brushes against her thighs. She thinks of all the way in which he shows himself to her, revealing himself, exposing his heart. She thinks and thinks until she can think no more.

He kisses his way up her perspiring body, all the way up to her panting face. She sees herself reflected in his eyes, all her doubts and fears and most of all just her. Who she is. Her essence. "You're bleeding," he whispers, his eyes drifting to the spot on her lip where she had bit herself to stop from screaming. He gently licks the blood off her lip and kisses her. Her taste on his tongue makes her think that maybe, just maybe this could be all she ever needed. That she could teach herself to live with this.

With a gentleness she did not know she possessed; she reaches for him. His velvet length in her hand as hard as his eyes are soft. His breath hitches as she caresses him, and he shuts his eyes to hide from her how much he wants this. How much he wants her. There is a crinkle as a foil-wrapped package appears in her hand, pulled from her pocket dimension just as the worry frets his forehead. He laughs at her timing, her ability to always read his mind. It makes her grin. She rolls it over him with a smoothness that belies her inexperience. And when she guides him to her she knows that while she does not deserve this, he does.

The stars in the sky above her whisper to her the secrets of the universe and when she closes her eyes, she can still see them, exploding like fireworks under her eyelids. He laces his fingers with hers and presses kisses to her face; her forehead, her cheeks, her eyelids, the corner of her mouth. And when he moves in her, she understands at last, what it is to be cherished.

He falls asleep with his face buried in the crook of her neck, his hand holding hers to his steadily beating heart. His weight is heavy and solid against her. She knows he will never hurt her. That he would always protect her better than any armour ever could. She knows, if she let him, he would love her.

She is gone in the morning before he wakes.

by prestocrayon
Gray...
Please
Erza...

Erza opened her eyes and blinked once, twice. She appeared to be floating and was wearing an unfamiliar white dress, which was confusing enough. Even more mystifying was that she was looking down at her friends and guildmates gathered around a memorial out in the cemetery, crying and huddling in their coal-black clothes like beady-eyed ravens. A funeral, she realized. But who…?

She looked down at her hands, wondering if they were paler than usual or she was just imagining it. The last thing she remembered was being back at the Tower with Jellal, melting into the giant lacrima while Natsu screamed at her to stop. Was she… dead? Was it *her* funeral?

"I'm dead," she said experimentally, her voice small and wavering. The words tasted bitter and unfamiliar on her tongue, and her mouth contorted around them strangely. It seemed too surreal.

"What are you doing?" Natsu roared, interrupting the Master's speech as he charged into the gathering with all the fury of an inferno. "She's not dead! She can't be. You know she—"

"Just stop!" Lucy cried, her voice cracking. A few of their guildmates rushed forward to restrain the dragon slayer until he calmed down. "She's gone, Natsu. She's…"

She dissolved into tears and covered her face with her hands. Gray stepped forward and wrapped his arms around her, and she buried her face in his chest and sobbed. Gray kept his head down and said nothing. And Natsu was crying too, although he didn't seem to realize it.

Erza felt sick to her stomach as she watched her team and guild crying like their hearts had been ripped out of their chests.

"This wasn't what I wanted," she whispered. "I just wanted them to live and be happy."

This couldn't be how it ended. She didn't want to hurt them like that. She had only ever wanted to protect them, but now she realized too late that you weren't supposed to die for your friends.

You were supposed to live for them.

Erza found her way back to the ground and followed the gloomy group as they trailed back to the guild. Natsu disappeared off into the streets as soon as he broke free from the friends trying to ground him. So did Gray. Everyone else straggled back to the guild hall and huddled in

silent, soggy clumps.

"I'm right here," Erza said, but no one heard her.

She tried to touch Lucy on the shoulder, shake her and make her *see*, but her hand went right through her friend like air. She eyed her hand like it was a venomous viper about to strike.

It wasn't right. None of this was right. She didn't want everyone to be heartbroken. She didn't want to be dead.

She had the strangest feeling that if she just tried *hard* enough, wished it *badly* enough, she could rewind time to before she'd surrendered herself to the lacrima. Maybe she could go back and get a redo, find another way so that they could all live together happily ever after.

But that was a thing for fantasy and fairy tales, and there was no magic strong enough to just wish herself back alive.

She wasn't a quitter, though. She shouted and waved her hands in front of people's faces and tried in vain to shake her friends.

"Why can't you *see* me?" she cried.

But her words fell on deaf ears and her body was invisible and her hands only slid through whatever she wanted to touch. No one took the slightest notice of her. Why should they? She was already gone.

"I'm right here," she said miserably.

Finally, she slumped over onto the bench beside Lucy in defeat and yelped as she slid right through the wood and landed on the floor. One of her legs appeared to be slipping through the floorboards. She imagined sinking through the floor and deep down into the earth to be buried alive — or dead, as the case might be.

She scrambled back to her feet and eyed the quicksand floor warily. She realized that she wasn't sinking, exactly, but her feet didn't rest on the floor quite right. It was like the idea of the floor was there but it wasn't quite solid, and her feet were getting it *almost* right but were still a little off — sometimes a little above the planks, sometimes a little below. And she felt nothing at all, no sense of pressure or firmness or chill or heat. It was like she was in her own little bubble, her own parallel world that overlapped the real one but didn't sit quite right and the edges didn't meet up.

It was making her dizzy and her thoughts spun wildly as she tried to process it, so she retreated to the corner and tore her gaze away to watch her guildmates instead. Which might distract her from her tenuous grip on reality but didn't make her feel any better. Watching them broke her heart.

They were all so miserable, and she was used to seeing them with smiles on their faces. She couldn't take it.

She fled from the guild, passing through the heavy double doors like a mirage, and *ran*. It didn't matter how far or fast she ran. She didn't gasp for breath or feel the blood pumping in her chest or get a stitch in her side. It was like floating in nothing. Like the world and all its sensations were disappearing…or maybe like she was.

Eventually, she found herself back at her memorial — her *grave*. She sank down into — through — the grass, folding her legs beneath her, and stared with empty eyes. Her panic was subsiding, her emotions burning away, and she

felt dull and hollow. Maybe she was forgetting how to feel along with how to sense.

She sat there for a long time, trying not to think about how she couldn't feel the tickle of grass on her legs or the chill evening breeze caressing her skin. She tried not to think about how she wasn't *breathing* and her heart wasn't *beating*. She tried not to think about her friends sobbing in each other's arms or slinking off to grieve alone. She tried not to think about what would happen to her now and what this meant and how *permanent* it was. She had no idea what would become of her or the guild, and she had always hated not knowing.

"Well, hello," said a voice from behind her. "You must be new."

She spun around so fast she almost lost her balance, and her knees didn't scrape against the gritty ground but passed right through it. There was a small girl with long curls of blonde hair and striking green eyes standing between the rows of gravestones. Her feet were bare, which seemed strange in the chilly weather. Erza glanced around, looking for whoever the girl might be addressing, but there was nothing to be seen except a striking sunset of orange and purple and a field of graves.

"This is the part where you tell me your name," the girl said, an amused lilt tugging at her voice. "Mine is Mavis."

Erza stared. "You can *see* me?"

"Yup!"

"But… You're a ghost too?"

Mavis wrinkled her nose and tilted her head as she considered that. "Sort of, I guess."

"What does that mean?"

The girl flapped her hand dismissively. "What's your name?"

Erza finally remembered her manners, and then wondered if they were necessary when you were dead and introducing yourself to other ghosts. "Erza. Who are you? What do we do now? Why are we still here? How do we make people see us? Or hear us? Or let them know we're still here? Can we—?"

"Whoa!" Mavis said, holding up her hands. "You ask even more questions than I do!"

Erza attempted to take a deep breath, before remembering that she couldn't anymore, and tried again. "Who are you? What are you doing here? Why—?"

She clamped her mouth shut tight, not wanting to chase her new acquaintance off with a bombardment of questions. This was the only other ghost she'd met, the only person who could still see and hear her, and she was terrified of being left alone again.

"I'm Mavis," the girl said brightly, as if that answered everything.

"Yes… You already said that. But—"

"Usually I stay on Tenrou, but I sensed some sort of disturbance with the guild and came to check it out. You must be Fairy Tail if you can see me."

"Tenrou?" Erza asked, her brows drawing together. That was an important place to the guild, but she wasn't seeing the connection. "But I was just in the guild and no one could see me."

"It's different for you," Mavis said with a shrug. "I'll probably go back soon. I like it there, and I don't have to watch the world pass me by. You can come if you want. If you're still hanging around."

Erza gave up trying to understand her cryptic answers and tried a different tack. "But why *am* I still hanging around? Why haven't I 'moved on' or whatever?"

Mavis shrugged. "Who knows? Maybe you have unfinished business to take care of. Maybe you're having a hard time letting go. Maybe someone is having a hard time letting go of you."

Erza shook her head, frustrated by the lack of solid answers. She wanted something to grasp on to, some tangible truth to make sense of her situations.

"But what do I *do*?"

Mavis sighed, age suddenly lining her child's face and darkening her emerald eyes. "I'm still here, aren't I? I suppose you'll have to figure it out for yourself." Then she smiled again, cheeks dimpling. "Well, I might as well take a look around before heading back to Tenrou," she said cheerfully. "I'll drop by to check on you before I go."

"Wait—"

But Mavis bounced off and seemed to disappear, leaving her alone again. Erza shivered against a wind she couldn't feel and pretended to cry tears that wouldn't come.

Erza soon discovered that one of the accoutrements of living she no longer needed — or, in fact, was *capable* of — was sleep. She sat by her grave for a long time until she grew restless, then paced about the graveyard and in larger rings around the city. She wandered the silent streets and walked between the rows of dark-eyed houses jutting up from the ground like a mouthful of jagged teeth.

She had always thought death would be a little like eternal sleep, if the whole heaven thing didn't pan out. It turned out to be anything but, and with her mind racing round and round in a wild tangle of panic and disbelief and uncertainty, she had nearly driven herself insane by the time the sun peeked over the horizon and bathed everything in a rosy glow. She wanted to cry in relief when the sun rose like clockwork, but tears were a thing of the past and she no longer seemed to possess tear ducts.

People began waking and venturing out into the streets, bleary-eyed and hiding yawns behind hands. The city was slowly waking and coming alive again, and Erza was so glad because the stillness of the night had made it seem like it was dead. Like her.

She was so desperate to *not* be the last thing on earth that she made a beeline for the guild despite how much it hurt to see them. She hovered in the corner and watched them with hungry eyes. Everyone was still subdued and swollen-eyed, but they looked a little less like waxy wraiths now that at least some of them were wearing proper colors again instead of heavy black.

Lucy's face was drawn in tight lines and her eyes were rimmed with red, but she was seated in her normal spot. Gray and Natsu and Happy were nowhere to be seen. Their usual table looked desolate and empty with only one member of the team left behind.

At least the guild tried for some semblance of normalcy, but everyone was much too gloomy and withdrawn to pull it off. And then, sometime around noon, Cana finally slammed her tankard down and broke through the somber atmosphere with a voice just a little too loud with drunkenness.

"You remember when she first came here?" she slurred. Every eye in the room jumped to her. No one asked who she meant. "She was so standoffish, but she put Gray right in his place. Ya know, I read his cards that morning and they said it would be his lucky day, and he was all whining 'cause he dropped his wallet in a mud puddle or something silly. Betcha he didn't think he was so lucky when she started beating him to a pulp!" She cackled, her voice catching in her throat in a funny way, almost like a half-formed sob. "She really was great at keeping our troublemakers in check. It was great having her keep Gray and Natsu in line…and even Mira, for a while."

And suddenly everyone had a story to tell, some small memory of something Erza had said or done over the years, something they'd felt for her. She wished more than anything that she could cry, because hearing about all those small moments she had taken for granted and all the things she would never be able to do again hurt. She wouldn't get to yell at Natsu for fighting or scold Cana for drinking too much or sit with Gray at the riverbank again. She wouldn't get to go fishing with Happy or tease Mira or share rolled eyes with Lucy at the boys' antics. She wouldn't get to eat strawberry cake or have a picnic or requip.

If she had known she was going to die, what would she have done first? What would she have said to her friends, as her last goodbyes? What would she have wanted to experience one last time? What would she have *done*?

But she hadn't known and she'd missed her chance and now it was too late. And the stories *hurt*, because she wanted to be right there in the middle sharing those memories with her friends and building new ones.

"I'm right *here*!" she said, but no one heard her. She was already gone.

Lucy stood up abruptly, and Levy trailed off in the middle of her sentence. "Are you okay, Lu-chan?"

Lucy nodded once, sharply. She hadn't said a word while everyone shared their stories. Hadn't even looked at them. Erza wondered if she felt it keenly too, that she wasn't part of this. They were opposites like that. Lucy hadn't been part of their life back then, and Erza wasn't part of it now.

"I think I'll check on Gray and Natsu," Lucy said, her voice ringing hollow.

"Or maybe not," Mira cautioned. "Natsu just needs a little space, and Happy is with him. And Gray… Just give them a day. I'm sure they'll come back after they've had a chance to grieve on their own."

Lucy walked out the door without responding, but she didn't, in fact, go looking for her missing teammates. She went home and curled up in her bed and cried, and Erza hovered beside her awkwardly, whispering words of comfort she couldn't hear and trying to figure out how to touch without putting her hand through Lucy's shoulder.

It was awful.

Erza stayed until she couldn't take it anymore, feeling it her duty to witness the pain she had caused and to stand by her friend the only

way she could, and then fled into the streets once more. She couldn't bear to go back to the guild, with all its gloomy faces and tales of days long past. When she wandered the streets calling for Mavis, there was no response. And not once did she find another ghost or anyone who could see her.

Eventually, she gave up and went on the hunt. It was true that Natsu and Gray weren't the type who liked to be disturbed while they were grieving, but it wasn't like they'd see her anyway. If the guild couldn't check on them, she would. It seemed like a very bad idea given how overwhelming everyone's grief was, but she felt an irresistible pull tugging her towards the guild and her friends. No matter how much it hurt, there wasn't anywhere else she'd rather be. Anywhere else she *could* be. Where else would she go? What else would she do? These were the people that had her heart, and she couldn't bear to go wandering off into the great unknown without them.

She found Natsu in the forest outside the city by following the sound of splintering trees and wanton destruction. The dragon slayer had charred every tree within a hundred foot radius, and was attacking the blackened stumps as if he intended to rip them out of the ground or burn them down to nothing.

"Natsu, you have to stop," Happy was saying from where he hovered in the air several feet back. "You can't be angry at her forever."

"Watch me," Natsu snarled. He punched the blackened skeleton of an oak with a fiery fist, and Happy retreated another few paces to avoid the rain of ash and splinters. "How dare she give up like that?"

Erza shrank back, feeling like she was intruding on something private, something she wasn't meant to see. Maybe something she didn't *want* to see. She didn't want to see Natsu's grief manifested as rage. She didn't want to hear him condemn her for what she'd done.

"She's gone, Natsu." Happy's ears flattened back against his skull, and his tail drooped. "It's not fair to be angry anymore."

"What gives her the right to kill herself just like that? How could she be so *selfish*?"

"Natsu… You did everything you could. You can't be angry anymore — it's not your fault."

And Happy's words made Erza realize who Natsu really blamed even before the dragon slayer's face crumpled.

"But I was right there," he whispered. The flames flickering around his fists died away, and he buried his face in his hands. "I could have stopped her."

"Oh, Natsu," Erza murmured. "It wasn't your job to stop me."

"No, you couldn't have," Happy said. "No one could stop her once she'd decided to do something."

"You don't understand!" Natsu cried. "I almost *did*! I almost managed to pull her out of that lacrima. I was so *close*. Everything exploded and she was right *there*, and I grabbed her but I couldn't hold on. I couldn't hold on."

He sank to his knees in the middle of the wreckage, anger spent, and doubled over with the force of his sobs. Erza looked on in horror as Happy zipped over and wriggled into his lap.

She wondered what would have happened if he *did* manage to hold on and drag her out of the magical vortex. She wondered

if she would have lived, or if everyone would have died in the explosion. The only real possibilities she could imagine were dying to save them all or standing by and watching them burn. Now she wondered if there could have been such a thing as a happily ever after.

But she had made her choice, and there was no going back now. And Natsu shouldn't be taking the blame for the choices she'd made.

She sank to her knees beside him, white skirt fluttering across the black ash, and whispered that it was okay, it wasn't his fault, he should go back to the guild for their support. He couldn't hear her, but she hoped that maybe he could feel her presence just a little and it might bring him some comfort.

If so, he showed no sign of it.

She talked until she ran out of words, and then she stood with a heavy heart and left Happy to console him. There was nothing more that she could do.

Gray was easier to find, although she hesitated on his doorstep. She wasn't sure she wanted to see any more grief today, but she could feel that pull tugging her toward him, that sense of responsibility. Maybe this was her penance, her purgatory.

Unlike Natsu's emotional whirlwind, Gray's grief was silent and solitary and still. Erza found him still in bed, covers pulled tight around him. At first she thought he was sleeping, but his eyes were open and he stared blankly out the window near the bedside. The silence was suffocating. He barely seemed to be breathing and never moved. The utter lack of life was more unnerving than the crying or anger of the others. Erza didn't know what to make of it, especially when the Gray she knew was usually so full of life and emotion.

She hovered in the corner, watching uneasily. She was searching for some sign that he would be okay, but he gave her none. She could connect to the others through their stories or crying or words, but Gray had built a wall to keep her out. There was nothing to give away what he might be thinking or feeling behind those dead slate eyes.

She willed him to do something, anything, but he didn't move. And she couldn't leave, not while he was like this. As much as she hated watching, she couldn't look away.

She knew the guild would be okay eventually, that they'd tell their stories and keep her in their memories but slowly move on. They had recovered from Lisanna's 'death', and they would recover from hers. Lucy would be okay once her tears dried. She had so many friends to love her and such a positive, optimistic view of the world. Natsu would be okay and eventually let go of the guilt. He always bounced back stronger than before, and nothing could keep him down. He and Happy would be there for each other, and the guild would come together. They had to.

Gray would be okay too, surely, but this lifeless version of him was giving Erza doubts. Usually he was so strong. Maybe sometimes he felt too much, got angry or sad or even self-destructive, but he was always feeling something, doing something. He never just laid there and gave up. He was always in motion, and his utter stillness was disconcerting.

"Come on, Gray," Erza whispered into the silence. "Get up. Do something. Cry or scream, hate me or love me, but do *something*."

But of course he couldn't hear her. He bare-

ly moved all day, as the afternoon sun faded to twilight and disappeared into evening's shadows. Erza wanted to run and find Mavis and beg her for a way to fix this, all of this. There had to be *something* she could do to bring her friends peace. There had to be a reason she was still here.

But she found herself rooted to the spot. Everyone had someone to lean on, but Gray was alone. He could go to the others, but he wouldn't. He had lost too many people and been alone too long, and Erza couldn't be the reason he went back after all this time. She couldn't just leave him alone again, even if he didn't know it.

She sat with him throughout the night, hovering just at chair level with some concentration in the chair across the room. She watched the stars out the window as his breathing finally evened out. They were so pretty, but the darkness was so big and so black. It looked like the night could swallow them whole. She wished she and her friends weren't being swallowed up one by one in the darkness.

The night went on forever, but slowly the sun rose again and splashed crimson across the sky like blood.

Gray rose with the dawn, moving slowly and stiffly but *moving*. Erza watched apprehensively as he dragged himself across the room and disappeared into the bathroom. He reappeared a few minutes later, clothing straightened and hair combed.

His eyes didn't seem to focus on anything as he walked out the door. Erza followed him back to the guild. Everyone was there again, including Gray and Natsu and Happy and Lucy. It *had* to be a good sign that they were all back together again, but she couldn't help but watch her team anxiously, especially Gray. He was quiet and withdrawn, but at least he'd rejoined the world.

Erza sat beside them at their usual table, pretending that she could feel the bench beneath her and the tabletop under her fingertips, but conversation was stilted. She stuck it out for an hour, maybe two, and then slipped back out of the building. She just couldn't stand seeing them like that, with all the life sucked out of them. Surely they were doing better now and didn't need her standing guard.

Or that was what she tried to tell herself, but she found herself unable to leave entirely and hovered uncertainly outside the guild hall. Where else was she supposed to go? This was her home, her family.

"You're very attached to them, aren't you?" Mavis asked. Erza started in surprise and turned to see that the blonde-haired girl was also standing along the front wall, face plastered to the window as she peered inside. "And they're very attached to you. Especially the dark-haired one."

"Dark-haired one?" Erza repeated. She drifted over to see who Mavis was looking at. "Gray? I don't see why he should be any more attached than the others."

"Can't you feel it? The pull they have on you?"

Mavis had put a name to the feeling Erza was struggling with, the one that had slipped beneath her skin and pulled tight like fish hooks, reeling her back in when she tried to stray too far. And…maybe it was stronger with Gray and that was why she had been unable to leave his side all night. But she didn't know why it would be like that or what she should do about it.

"Yes, but…"

Mavis turned away from the glass and smiled brightly. "Now that you're out, do you want to come look around the city with me? Magnolia has changed so much! I've been finding so many fun things!"

Erza eyed her in disbelief. "Why would I want to explore the city I've lived in half my life? I'm supposed to be here. They need me."

Mavis clicked her tongue in disapproval. "No wonder you haven't been able to move on. They're holding on too tightly, and you're holding on just as tight to them."

"Is that such a bad thing? There has to be something I can do to help them. You know more than I do, don't you? Can't you tell me how I can make them see me? What can I do? How can I help?"

Mavis tilted her head, and her normally clear eyes were solemn. "You're dead," she said. "You don't belong here. You don't exist in their world anymore, and that's not something you can change. You can't help them now. All you can do is let go."

And then she turned and disappeared into the streets, leaving Erza to press against the glass desperately and watch her family from the outside looking in.

Erza watched the guild go through all its stages of grief over the next few weeks. She watched as they cried and raged and dried their eyes. She watched as their ever-present gloom faded little by little, resurfacing in the quiet moments or in the wake of careless words but retreating enough to allow small smiles and the energy to go out on jobs again. She watched as they found a new balance, a new normal.

She watched as they began to let go.

She could feel it, too. She felt lighter, like air, and often found herself hovering a few inches above where she thought the ground ought to be. She didn't feel as tightly tethered to the guild, and could wander out farther into the city to pester Mavis about death and the afterlife and how to communicate with the living. That girl was a puzzle that Erza hadn't come close to solving. She would vanish without a trace and appear whenever she wanted, like an aloof cat living her death on her own time. Sometimes she would come when Erza called for her. More often, she wouldn't. But she was the only other ghost Erza had met, despite more time spent hanging around graveyards and wandering the city, so there wasn't much to be done about it.

Erza still hung around the guild, though. She was glad to see them moving on with their lives, even if she wasn't a part of them. It wasn't as if they'd forgotten about her. They still told stories from time to time and went misty-eyed. And when the sadness got too big and the loss hurt too much, they would venture out to her grave.

She took morbid fascination in following them out. Some of them went often, some went only once. Some went in pairs or groups, some went alone. Some told the others where they were going, some went in secret. Some brought flowers, some brought words, some brought silence.

They always got a strange kind of shine in their eyes when they were about to leave,

the glitter of nostalgia and unhealed scars and unshed tears. She always knew, when they headed for the door, where they were going. And she always followed. It was like she had a masochistic urge to *know*, and it made her feel better that she was there and listening to the words they wanted to reach her but didn't think could. She wanted to think that they sensed her presence on some level and it brought them comfort.

Lucy came often with words — lots and lots of words — and tears. Natsu and Happy came only once, and brought only silence behind tight-pressed lips. Mira and Lisanna and Elfman came together. Cana came drunk. The Master brought scarlet roses and stood in misty-eyed silence for several minutes before saying his halting goodbyes. Everyone came. And everyone went.

Except for Gray.

Gray did not visit her grave after the funeral, not even once. He did not share in the guild's stories or tears or goodbyes. He kept his sadness to himself, playing his part during the day and then going home to stare blankly at the walls or out the windows in silence until finally falling asleep. His eyes were the brightest of them all behind the hazy film clouding them, the too-bright, gritty light of crackling fluorescent bulbs at three o'clock on a Tuesday morning at the 24-hour corner store. It was awful. It barely seemed like Gray at all.

Erza was slowly floating away from the others as they learned to let go of her and she learned to let them, but the tether linking her to Gray only tightened. Mavis was right: he wasn't letting her go. And Erza couldn't just leave him like that.

She took to following him around on everything from jobs to grocery shopping to the solitary walk back home at the end of the day. No matter how closely she watched, she couldn't pierce through his walls and read him.

Mavis was no help, shrugging her thin, childlike shoulders and saying that he'd have to move on in his own time and there wasn't much she could do about it. Erza couldn't accept that, but it wasn't like she could *do* anything, either. And it wasn't for lack of trying. She tried everything from moving objects to writing in the condensation on his windowpanes to whispering in his ear while he dozed as if she could speak right into his dreams. Nothing worked.

And then, nearly two and a half months after her death, Gray's eyes changed. He got up one morning and looked out the window for a long time, and then he turned away with clear, shining eyes and pulled on his clothes with a new sense of purpose that had been lacking from his listless existence. Erza took immediate notice. She recognized that look.

She was not surprised when he slipped out into the streets and turned away from the guild. Finally, she thought. Finally, he was going to talk to her or at least acknowledge her. But he did not go to the graveyard.

He walked out to the river and sat down on its banks, and Erza sat beside him with her insubstantial knees hugged to her insubstantial chest with insubstantial arms that felt like nothing at all. She found herself suddenly afraid of what he might say, what form his unleashed sorrow might take. It had hurt so much to watch the others go through it, but they seemed to be working through it a little at a time and this had been their first step too.

So even though she had the sudden urge

to run and cover her ears, she stayed put and watched quietly. She soon realized that she had been worried about nothing, because this was Gray and his grief was silent. He said nothing, just stared out at the glassy water with his too-bright eyes and thought his own private thoughts.

But then, right when Erza was starting to relax, he drew in a deep breath.

"That was very selfish of you, Erza," he said, his voice creaking and husky like he hadn't spoken in days. He didn't look at her, of course, but Erza could feel his words pointed straight at her, cutting deep and hooking their barbs beneath her skin like he was talking directly to her rather than to a memory. "But I'm sure you knew that. You and I have always been a little too recklessly self-sacrificial, but I thought you were better than me. I thought you would make it."

He fell silent again, and Erza squirmed uncomfortably. She wondered if maybe that was part of the reason he was still so shaken up by her death, because he'd tried to sacrifice himself before too and been stopped. He had lived, and this was the other side of the coin. This was what could have happened to him, the consequences he could have wrought.

"I promised I would get you out of there," he mumbled, raw and breathy. He hunched his shoulders and drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms around them tight. "I promised."

"Oh, Gray," Erza sighed. She was reminded again of Natsu, but the sad and rubbed-raw version where the grief hadn't sparked bright in anger. "You know it was my choice."

Wasn't that why Natsu had been so furious? He knew Erza had made her choices and they couldn't make her stop. And yet they all still felt like they *should* have been able to fix it somehow.

Erza understood, even though she didn't blame them. If anyone was to blame, it was herself. If only she could have found another way.

But the time for what-ifs was over. Nothing could be changed anymore, and wishing wouldn't change that. It was better to accept the way things were and move on. They were all starting to move on, and soon Erza would too. Once Gray let go, maybe. She would find out what death looked like on the 'other side', whatever that meant. And maybe it was a little frightening, but she had some hope for the unknown.

If only Gray could accept that she was gone. As hard as it was to linger and watch her friends grieve, Erza wouldn't leave until she was sure they'd be okay.

Gray drew in a shuddering breath, and his voice wavered.

"I loved you, you know," he whispered, voice cracking. "Well, of course you didn't, because I was an idiot and never told you. But I was head over heels in love with you."

For a moment, Erza could have sworn she still had a heart because she could almost feel it stop. She stared at the trembling of his jaw, the glassy-bright pain in his eyes, and couldn't comprehend it.

"I was so afraid of telling you anything or getting too close because it seems like everyone I dare to love dies." Gray laughed, a strangled, breathy little huff that sounded more like a sob than anything. He buried his head in his arms, and his voice was almost muffled out of

existence as he mumbled, "But I guess it didn't matter."

Erza watched in horror as his shoulders shook and his breaths hitched. She hadn't seen him cry since her death.

"I should've just told you, whatever came of it," he sobbed into his knees. "But now it's too late and we'll never know what could have happened. We don't even have the chance to try. You never gave me the chance."

Erza gaped at him, her mind grinding to a stop and spinning out of control. He…*loved* her? *Love*-loved her?

She had never known, never even suspected. And she had always been too hung up on Jellal to even consider pursuing another relationship.

But she had also never considered the *possibility*, and somehow that seemed like a terrible thing. Out of all the doors that had slammed in her face, all the lost futures suddenly closed off, this one slammed shut the hardest. Maybe it would have never gone anywhere or maybe they could have built something beautiful, but they would never have the chance to find out either way.

"*I* didn't?" she asked, her voice faltering. "*You* never gave *me* the chance."

Even if nothing had ever come of it, even if it would have never worked out, she wished she had *known*. She wished she'd had the opportunity to at least *try*.

Gray stood up abruptly and scrubbed at his face. Erza scrambled to her feet beside him.

"Gray, look at me," she begged. "Gray, say something."

But he just turned on his heel and walked away. He didn't look back.

Erza lunged after him. "Where are you going?" she cried. "You can't just say something like that and walk away! Gray, get back here! Gray! *Gray!*"

She made a grab for his arm, but her hand passed right on through. She stopped short and stared at her fingers. They looked so real, but were nothing more than an illusion. Had she forgotten that for a moment? For just a second, she had been something more than dead.

But that second was over, and Gray strode back through the grass with brisk, purposeful strides and disappeared. Erza could only stare after him.

"Wow, that was really something. I figured it was something like that."

She started in surprise and frowned over at Mavis, who had poked her head out from behind the tree she'd been spying behind.

"Because he was holding on so tight?" Erza asked dully, still too busy trying to process Gray's revelation to pay too much mind to the other ghost's appearing act.

Mavis snorted derisively. "Heavens, no. Anyone can do that. Family and friends hold on just as tight as lovers. He just had that hangdog look to him, all lost young love. Awful stuff."

Erza had never noticed that look, at least not until Gray and Mavis had put a name to it. How could she have been so *blind*? She thought back frantically to her life. Her real life, not this pale, fading incarnation. Had there been something in his eyes, his smile, his words that she had missed?

"You have to help me." She didn't care that she was begging and refused to acknowledge the flat look in Mavis' eyes. "I have to talk to him, he has to see me, I have to–"

"To what?" Mavis interrupted. Her usually cheery eyes were murky, and her voice was knife-sharp. "You can't do anything."

"But he *loves* me!"

"And? You're *dead*. You don't get to have love affairs anymore. That's all over now." She shook her head wearily, the fight draining out of her. "Anyway, I was coming to tell you that I've had enough here and I'm heading back to Tenrou. I thought you would have moved on by now, but you're welcome to come since you're still here."

"I can't just *leave*," Erza protested. "My family is here, and Gray–"

"Loves you," Mavis finished tiredly. She sighed. "I thought they were keeping you here, but maybe you're the one holding on too tightly. They're starting to let you go. You need to stop holding on to a life you can no longer live. How many other ghosts do you see wandering around? It's not normal. You need to move on."

"*You* haven't," Erza said snidely, seething.

"I'm different." Mavis turned away, bare feet flitting through the grass as she headed after Gray. "I hope you move on soon and find your rest. But if you don't, feel free to drop by Tenrou and say hi. It was nice having a friend again for a little while."

And then she was gone, and Gray was gone, and the guild was letting go. And Erza stared after them all from her private, lonely world and watched them leave her behind.

Erza followed Gray obsessively, a shadow attached to his heels. If she'd felt a pull to him before, she felt positively chained to him now.

She didn't spend as much time watching the guild or following her friends out to her grave and wondering what they were thinking. They were moving on, and now it was just her and Gray left. Mavis never reappeared. No other ghost materialized to say hello. And Gray still couldn't see her, so she might as well be alone.

It wasn't for a lack of trying. She talked to him constantly, tried to touch or leave messages or make things move. She found herself thwarted at every turn, and Gray drifted on gloomily, blissfully unaware.

She didn't know if she loved him, but she thought that she *could*. If she could just have a *chance*, she was sure they could be happy. The what-ifs swirled about her in a murky whirlpool, haunting her with glimpses of futures that could have been. If only, if only.

She wondered if that was what Gray was seeing too when he sat by the window and gazed out blankly at the sky, eyes distant and mind miles away. He was still so sad, still missed her so much. Erza should wish for him to move on like the others, but that selfish corner of her heart was relieved that he was still holding on. That someone was still holding on to her.

And then one day, maybe two weeks later, Gray's routine changed again. He didn't go to the guild first thing in the morning like usual, or lie in bed staring at the ceiling or grab a job and run. His eyes had that gleam again, but not as bright and gritty. Something softer, maybe a little sadder.

Erza followed at his heels like a lost puppy, just like always these days. She followed him past the guild, past the river, and into the cemetery. Her steps faltered at the gates, and she wished more than ever that she could read his mind. He had never come here before, not once, and she didn't know what it meant that he was coming now, all these weeks later.

"What's wrong, Gray?" she murmured as she kicked herself back into action and followed him along the grassy paths to the memorial bearing her name. "Talk to me."

And, for once, he did.

"Hey, Erza." He toed at the ground and frowned at his feet. "It's been a while. Sorry I never came by." He was quiet for a few seconds before huffing out a breath. "I feel stupid talking to a rock. Lucy swears by it, but all I see is a rock in the ground…not you."

There was another long silence before he took a deep breath and kept going, and Erza drifted forward and watched him hungrily, hanging on every word.

"I love you, you know," he said. "I never told you. I guess I should have, before it was too late, even if you shot me down. You were beautiful, but also… You were so strong, and I admired you for being tough on the inside too, always overcoming the worst and rising above it. I loved the way you'd freak out over strawberry cake and how you'd always knock me and Natsu around and the way your eyes sparkled when you got excited about the most random things.

"I've loved you for a long time. Years. I guess I was too scared to tell you, because I'm not brave like you were. But now I wish I had. Even if you didn't feel the same way, I wish you had known that someone loved you like that, that you were special. Maybe if you'd known how special you were to someone, you wouldn't have thrown your life away like that."

Erza winced and reached out, but her fingers slid through his skin like air. "Oh, Gray…"

Gray drew in a shuddering breath and shook his head. "Wishful thinking, maybe. I don't think that would have stopped me if our positions were reversed, but still…

"Well… I didn't really want to come here. It's too final, too ugly. I wasn't ready to face it. But maybe I am now, or at least I'm getting there. I still love you. I miss you so much, and it hurts so bad. I don't think I'll ever stop loving you, but I can't spend the rest of my life staring out the window, stupidly hoping that I'll see you coming back. You're gone and I'm not, and I guess I owe it to you to keep on living since you died for us and all that. I hope you found your peace, and I hope that someday I'll find mine.

"And so I came here today to say goodbye."

Erza would have been in tears if she could still cry, floored by the aching love dripping off each word and amazed that she had been so valued and not even known it, but now fear seized her heart.

"Wait," she said, but he kept talking.

"You were such a special woman, Erza." His pale fingers fluttered through the air in graceful curves, forming crystalline roses between their tips. "You deserved the chance to grow up and live your life, and I wish more than anything that I could have been there at your side. I wish you were still here. But you're gone, and I can't live off memories. I will always remember you. I will always love you. And it hurts to let you go."

He leaned down to place the icy bouquet by the gray stone carved with her name.

"Goodbye, Erza."

And he turned his back and walked away.

"Wait!" Erza cried, lunging after him. Her grasping hand met only air. "I'm right here! I'm still here! Don't go! *Gray!*"

But he was already gone, untouchable. Everyone was learning how to move on, but Erza suddenly realized that she couldn't just let go of them. She wanted to eat strawberry cake again and go on another job with the team and kiss Gray to see what it felt like. She wanted to live and laugh and love.

She fell to her knees with a tearless wail.

She didn't want to say goodbye.

Tears Aesthetic *by* ZerefSerigala

8-Island Undressing

by Artku

Clang! The sound of a metal tray connecting with Natsu's unusually hard head rang through Hargeon's newest restaurant.

"Don't eat the customers' food!" Lucy yelled.

"Don't throw trays!" Happy exclaimed, coming to his best friend's defence. Natsu merely continued chewing, unperturbed by the fact that the drumstick he had previously been enjoying was now fully inside his mouth, bone and all. Gray caught the flicker that crossed Lucy's face and decided to intervene before her meltdown caused an even bigger scene.

"Sometimes, it's nice to dress up like a waiter too," he said, holding a tray of drinks aloft.

"Say that after putting on some clothes," Lucy countered, casting an eye over his barely clad body. In his defence, a bowtie and boxer shorts did count as waiter attire in some establishments. Maybe not in a former council member's new family restaurant. But in some places.

Gray narrowed his eyes at her. "Hey now, whose rent are we doing this for again?" he scolded.

"Sorry," Lucy mumbled sheepishly. Afterall, their last mission to capture the bandit Velveno had fallen through because of her.

"Besides," he continued, his voice softening, "take a look." He inclined his head towards the redhead walking between the tables, her hips swaying dangerously with every step. She leaned over a table, providing the unwitting customers an eyeful of her assets.

"Allow me to take your order," she purred.

Gray pitied the poor awestruck fools. OK, maybe not. He felt distinctly irked by the lecherous gleam in one guy's eye.

"What do you want?" Erza demanded. "Come on, out with it!" She slammed her hand down on the table.

Gray swung back towards pity. The three customers ended up ordering one of every item on the menu. That was going to make quite a dent in their pockets.

"I see. That makes it much easier. You have my gratitude." The simpering purr returned to her voice.

"Likewise!" they chorused. It looked like Titania's fan club had three new members. Gray sweatdropped. "Some guys are really into it," he muttered. He counted himself as one of the unfortunate lot. A bright orange pinafore did little to diminish Erza's beauty.

edit *by* gaymirajane

She turned away from the table and smirked. "This, too, is a challenge."

She winked at Gray on her way to the kitchen, brushing past him so deliberately that he was starting to regret his lack of trousers. He tried not to be too obvious as he watched her walk away. Oh Mavis, he was in big trouble and he was not even sure when it began.

It began, as these things tend to, with a perfectly innocent idea. "Master!" Mira chirped, "What do you think of having some kind of competition to boost guild morale?"

Makarov scratched his chin and hummed. "A competition, you say? But what kind?" His eyes lit up. "A swimsuit modelling contest!"

Mira 'accidentally' dropped her serving tray on his head. "Ho ho ho, I am so clumsy today."

"Yes, you have been clumsy a lot of late," he grumbled, giving her a sideways glance.

A brawl was breaking out somewhere in front of them. They ignored it and continued to brainstorm.

"A race?" Mira suggested.

"We already have one every year. Rejected. A maid-cosplay contest?"

"Oops, dropped my tray again. Rejected. A quiz?"

Natsu squared off against Gray, "You want

a piece of me, you- you- black-haired person?"

"I'm ready when you are, you pink haired person!"

Mira and Master Makarov exchanged a glance. "Rejected." The two of them ducked as a table was sent flying their way.

"WHO WRECKED MY CAKE?!" a furious Erza yelled, flipping another table.

"Cake-baking contest?" Makarov suggested mildly.

"This is going to be fun."

"A bake-off? Whose dumb idea was this?" Gray asked. "Oh, it was you, Mirajane? No, no, I was joking. It's a great idea!"

"Yoss! I will show everyone the true art of baking." Erza requipped into her Chef Armour, which consisted of a swimsuit, an apron and a tall chef's hat.

A loud burp caught everyone's attention. "What's the prize?" Cana slurred.

"Maybe I can win this competition and pay my rent," Lucy schemed.

"The prize is…" Mira thought aloud. Her eyes alighted upon Master Makarov's slumbering form. "Master Makarov will do anything you ask for a day."

"Huh?" The bubble of snot dangling from Master Makarov's nose burst with a pop. "One hour," he replied sternly.

"Half a day."

"One hour."

Mira pouted. "You're no fun Master. One hour. Master Makarov will do anything you ask for one hour."

The guildhall filled with the susurration of excited whispering. Master Makarov cleared his throat. "There is one caveat: you will have to compete in pairs!"

Natsu sprang up on a table. "Alright! Bake a cake and get Master to work for you! Are you ready, Happy?"

"Aye Sir!"

"The contest will be held in two weeks' time. So, practice hard everyone!" Mira said.

'In pairs eh?' thought a figure lurking at the back of the hall. 'Time to get my revenge.'

Evergreen slipped onto the barstool next to Juvia. "Why so glum?"

"Juvia wants to ask Gray-sama to be her partner for the competition but Juvia's baking skills are still at the beginner level."

"Oh, is that all," Evergreen said with fake nonchalance. It was time to put her plan in action. She had overheard Erza talking to herself in the bath a few days ago and now she had the perfect way to get her revenge. "You know, I have heard that baking together with someone is a sure-shot way to fall in love."

"Really?!"

The sudden change in Juvia's demeanour told Evergreen that her plan was working. All that was left was to go in for the kill. "But I think Gray is going to ask Lucy, anyway."

Juvia was gone from her seat before Ever could say 'drip.'

Evergreen watched her go with the smug satisfaction of a billiards champion watching a trick shot knock the 8-ball into the pocket closely followed by a second.

"Gray-sama! Juvia will be your partner for the competition!" Juvia sang.

"No thanks," he said flatly.

"Everyone! Don't forget the competition is compulsory," Mira chirped with a sweet smile on her face, "Those who don't participate will have to undergo Master's punishment."

Gray paled, visions of a four-tier cake in the shape of his face warred with visions of Makarov's punishment. Which would be the greater evil? "Ah ha huhhhh," he floundered.

"Does- does Gray-sama already have a partner?" Juvia asked, disappointment rising in her voice.

"Yes," he lied, casting about for a likely candidate. Juvia had offered him a ready-made excuse; it would be rude not to use it. He spotted his teammate's familiar red head and prayed to the Gods that she would play along. "Erza!"

"What is the matter, Gray?" she asked, walking over.

Evergreen watched the exchange with growing horror. The cue ball skated past the 8, pinged off the edge of the table and rolled into the pocket.

An expression that was halfway between puppy dog eyes and a fake smile etched itself on Gray's face. "I was just telling Juvia that we had already decided to enter the baking contest together."

"We did?" Erza replied, puzzled. She caught the brief but meaningful tilt of his head. She tilted hers back, as if to say, 'You owe me.' She clapped a hand on Gray's shoulder and said, "Of course we did. When you want to win a cake-baking contest, you come to an expert on cake. And we all know Gray hates to lose."

These lines were delivered with all the expression and smoothness of a marionette. Fortunately for Gray, Juvia was too trusting to suspect that Erza was lying. She slunk, defeated, back to Evergreen and the two of them decided to drown their failure in liquor.

Neither Gray nor Erza spared them a glance. "So, partner," Erza said, her grip on his shoulder tightening, "When do we get started?"

And that was how it all began.

Gray wiped away the fleck of egg white that had landed on his eyelid and surveyed the disaster-zone formerly known as his kitchen. "I don't think you're supposed to literally beat the egg whites, Erza," he commented dryly.

"They keep getting clumpy and frozen in this stupid ice bowl," she growled, angrily stabbing at the mixture with a whisk.

"You broke all my other bowls. This was the

best I could do."

Erza looked at the graveyard of pottery scattered along the northern wall of the kitchen. "Stupid, flimsy things."

"That one over there was made of stone."

Gray was grateful that looks could not actually kill. He needed to stop flapping his mouth around her. It was strange and new; this side of Erza. She was… open. And easy to talk to. When did that happen? She had always been his nakama, but now she was also becoming his friend. One of his closest friends. Closer now than she had ever been, in fact.

"Erza, why are you sniffing me?" he asked, taking a step back. It was easy to ignore the fact that Erza's Chef Armour was just a swimsuit and an apron when she was several feet away. Not when she was within kissing distance. Gray started at the peculiar choice of words his brain had landed upon. He took a few more steps just to be safe.

"Weird. I can still smell your laundry detergent even when you're not wearing any clothes," Erza said.

A look down at his torso confirmed that he had indeed managed to strip again. Boxer shorts included. "Ack! My clothes!"

A couple of hours later, Gray was pulling a fairly passable-looking cake from the oven. Things had gone a lot more smoothly when they had exchanged roles. Erza was very good at measuring and he was very good at not breaking his crockery.

"Not bad eh?" he said.

"We'll need to slice away part of the top to give it a better shape." She passed him the mixing bowl and whisk. "Here, take over."

He dutifully took over the preparation of the whipped cream frosting while she shaped the cake with her sword. They made a good team, the two of them.

"Now what?" he asked, when she was done.

"Now we wait for the cake to cool and then we ice it!"

Gray raised an eyebrow. "You know I can cool the cake in four seconds, right?"

"No! The cake must cool gradually. Or else it will have a terrible texture."

The fierce look in her eye made his knees tremble just the slightest bit. "Fine. I won't."

"What should I do with this then?" he asked, "Keep it cool?"

"That is for me," she replied calmly, plucking the bowl from his hands. "You need to make some more for the cake."

Gray watched speechlessly as she added two punnets of strawberries to the bowl and proceeded to eat the whole thing.

"Who are the judges for the competition anyway?" he asked when he had recovered sufficiently.

Slap! The finger that had bravely tried to edge its way into the bowl of cream was retracted swiftly.

"That's a good question. I think it is going to be Master, Macao and Wakaba."

Gray sucked on his smarting finger. "Interesting," he replied. He began whipping up a fresh batch of frosting.

"Why?" Erza asked, licking some cream off the spatula. Her tongue lazily traced a figure eight over the wooden surface, scooping the fluffy white cream into her mouth.

Gray cleared his throat and focused on the task at hand. The cold bowl in his hand did little to assuage the sudden tightness he felt in his pants.

"Well? Out with it. Why is it interesting?"

He realised belatedly, that he had spent the last several minutes silently staring at nothing, whisking with unusual fervour. "Just, well, we could perhaps do something to cater to the judges' specific taste — sorry, you've got a bit of cream on your mouth."

"Oh. Where?" There was that bright pink tongue again, tracing the outline of her plump lips, trying to find the errant glob of cream.

"Here," Gray said, touching the corner of his mouth.

"Did I get it?" she asked, poking her tongue out on the opposite side to the one he had indicated.

"No, it's right here." Before he knew what he was doing, he had reached out and wiped the little dot of cream away. He stuck his thumb in his mouth absently.

"Ah uh, thank you," Erza said, her ears turning pink.

It was only then that Gray had realised what he had done. Flustered, he turned his head back to the bowl. "I didn't get to taste any earlier," he said, injecting a feigned coolness into his voice.

Her ears went as red as her hair. "Sorry," she said, "I really like cream."

How had he failed to notice, in all the years that he had known her, that Erza blushed with her ears? No wonder she always seemed so calm and collected. Her ears were almost always hidden under her hair. He coughed to cover up the strange fluttering feeling that had started up in his belly. "Right, um. So, as I was saying, we could maybe —"

"Time to frost the cake!" she interrupted. Few things in life were as important to Erza as cake and, in baking, timing was everything. She quickly screwed a nozzle onto an empty piping bag and passed it to Gray.

"I was thinking that we'd have a better chance of winning if we managed to do something that suited the judges' tastes," he continued. He piped delicate whorls of whipped cream along the edge of the pink cake.

"More. More. We need more cream." Erza instructed. "What could we add to the dish? We cannot put steak in a cake. That is Master's favourite."

"I don't know, we could ask around. Do some research. The competition is ten days away anyway."

Erza hummed, considering the idea. "Aha. I have got it!"

Gray looked up curiously, frosting the cake mechanically.

A yellow glow engulfed Erza. She reappeared in an armour that was sparse even by her standards. "There is one thing that all three of them like," she said, calmly rearranging the strategically placed leather stars on her mesh top.

Gray's hand slipped. A splodge of cream spurted from the tip of the piping bag.

The thin thread of white dripped limply towards the table. Gray recovered swiftly, quickly wiping the nozzle with his finger before the cream hit the wood.

"Sorry, I—"

Suddenly Erza's mouth was around his finger, hot and wet. Her tongue stroked a flat circle around him, setting his skin aflame.

Their eyes met and Erza released him, his finger sliding from her mouth with a pop. "Sorry," she said almost curiously, "I just really like cream."

The next ten days passed in something of a daze. Erza and Gray baked a practice cake every day. Every day, she would turn up on his doorstep, two heart-eyed, strawberry-carting Vulcans behind her. Every day, his kitchen grew smaller and smaller, until he began to wonder how he had ever managed to fit an oven in there, let alone a dining table with eight chairs.

They were unable to walk past each other without brushing up against each other. He would be chopping strawberries at the counter when she would need to access the shelf overhead, pressing her breasts into his back as she did. She would be measuring the flour just as he needed the egg whisk on the wall behind her, his mouth lingering by her steadily reddening ears.

They never made eye contact or acknowledged what they were doing. They never even spoke of why it was that Gray found it necessary to bury his nose in her hair every time he reached around her for something. Or why she insisted on sprinkling a thin layer of salt on the cake when it was done, mysteriously claiming that it 'just tastes better.'

In all honesty, Gray had no idea what he was doing. All he knew was that one day they were working on opposite ends of the kitchen and the next they'd miraculously ended up sharing the narrow countertop against the east wall. And that maybe he was pushing his luck just a bit further every day; his touches lingering just that bit longer, his actions growing just that bit bolder.

That and that his water bill was going through the roof because of all the cold showers he was taking.

And that maybe his stripping habit was finally getting under control, what with him sporting a half chub every time she walked into the room. In fact, he thought the more layers he had between his crotch and her, the better. He had sat next to her in the guildhall the other day, and she had slid her hand right up his boxer shorts! She had not gone too high, just a few inches above his knee, but it almost made him spontaneously combust. Happy had assumed he was choking and had gone flying off to Porlyusica for help.

He had almost said something to her then, but something made him hold back. What if he did ask her what they were doing, and they suddenly stopped? That would somehow be more agonising than the way he currently felt. He was happy with the way things were. No point in asking for more and losing it all. Right?

"Are you sure?" Freed's urgent whisper filtered over the speakers.

"Master, that's a wonderful idea!" Mirajane clapped her hands excitedly.

"You're getting more creative with every passing year," Wakaba said.

Gray and Erza exchanged wary looks. The shyness of the past two weeks was forgotten the instant they set foot in the guild hall. It was game time, and they were here to win.

Mirajane swept onto the stage, microphone in hand. "Good morning everyone, and welcome to Fairy Tail's first annual bake-off! The theme for this year's contest is... cakes! Be it sponge, gateau, fruit or erm... cup, anything goes! Surprise the judges with your creativity, blow them away with your flavours.

"Underneath your workbenches, you should find all the staples required to bake a cake, such as butter, flour and eggs. Of course, contestants will have full access to the Fairy Tail pantry for the duration of the cook." She paused. A dark aura enveloped her, despite her smiling face. "You had better not mess my kitchen up," she said sweetly.

"You will have three hours for the cook," Mirajane announced, "your time starts — aha! You didn't think it would be so easy, did you? Freed, if you will please do the honours."

Freed sighed and drew a rune in the air. "Laxus would never make me do this sort of work," he muttered. Purple runes began to appear along the guild walls.

"To make the competition a little more difficult, we have decided to institute a new rule! Since the contest is for pairs," Mira continued, "you will have to do everything together!"

Chains of purple runes sprang from the floor and cuffed themselves around the wrists of the participants. Gray looked at the runes wrapping his left wrist and followed them all the way to Erza's right hand. "Ah fuck."

"Language," Erza replied tersely.

Despite the fact that they would surely be hindered by this new rule, Gray could not help but smile at the now familiar flash of pink in her hair. Game face or not, being close to Gray made Erza blush.

"At random moments in the cook, the chain will get shorter."

Levy and Lucy stumbled as the chains suddenly lost several inches in length. "Damn, this is going to be tough!" Lucy mumbled.

"Don't worry Lu-chan, we've got this." Levy replied, already thinking of ways to rewrite Freed's trap.

"Other than the rules just stated, there are no other rules. So have fun and good luck! Your time starts... NOW!"

The guild erupted into a frenzy of activity. Erza grabbed the crate of ingredients from under the table and started sorting through them.

"And it looks like Evergreen and Bickslow are making the first move! Evergreen distracts Vijeeter and Warren with a Fairy Bomb, making them look into Bickslow's eyes. Warren and Vijeeter are under Bickslow's control now!" Macao exclaimed, really getting into his

role as a commentator.

Evergreen and Bickslow were reclining on lawn chairs, watching Vijeeter and Warren scurry about to do their bidding. "What?" Evergreen said boredly, "There are no rules against it."

"No rules! No rules!" echoed Bickslow's babies.

"That's right folks, anything goes in this competition, as long as you keep it under three hours and stay linked to your partner at all times," Wakaba added. "Now in our younger days..."

Gray tuned out Wakaba's voice. A fireball was coming their way. "Ice Make: Wall!" Erza lost her balance due to the sudden movement and crashed against him.

"Sorry," Gray muttered.

"No. Well done. I will be more alert next time."

"And looks like Gray has thwarted Natsu's attack! That was some quick thinking by the ice mage!" Wakaba said.

"Hold up! Levy and Lucy are taking advantage of the distraction."

"Open, Gate of the Crab! Cancer!"

"What can I do for you-ebi?" The celestial spirit clicked his scissors.

"Give the Guns Squad a haircut please!" Lucy said.

"Like hell you will. Guns Magic!"

Erza requipped into her Adamantine Armour and shielded herself and Gray from the ensuing gunfight. "We have two options here," she shouted over the noise.

"What?" Gray yelled back.

"We can either start attacking, or we can focus on the cake."

They exchanged a look. "Cake," they agreed in unison.

"We've got everything we need here but we don't have any strawberries," Gray said.

"I will get them. You guard our table." Erza requipped into her Swift Wind armour and took off, oblivious to the purple chain around her wrist. Gray crashed into their workbench.

"We're chained together, idiot!"

"It is not my fault. I cannot think straight when you are near me!"

"What?" A smile inched slowly across Gray's face.

"I meant, who are you calling an idiot?" she yanked on the rune-chain, pulled him towards her and delivered a swift whack to his head.

Imaginary birds twittered around his head but Gray continued smiling like a dope. Erza's blush was travelling southward, her cheeks turning the perfect pink of- "Strawberries!"

"You are right. Time to take extreme measures. Requip!" The air around Erza shimmered. A winged helm appeared around her head and steel plates fell around her waist with a clank. "Heaven's Wheel, Circle Sword!"

All around the guild hall, swords began to rain down. They thudded into the floor a hair's breadth from every contestant's feet. "You can fight amongst yourselves if you wish to. But leave Gray and I alone. Or else," she paused for

effect, her voice laced with menace, "the next sword will not miss."

"Scary!" Happy squealed, "As you wish, Erza-sama!"

"Aye!" yelped his partner, saluting smartly.

"Strawberries?" Erza asked, turning to Gray.

"You don't scare me, Titania!" Gajeel sent an Iron Dragon Roar their way.

"Juvia is sorry, Gray-sama! Water Slicer!" His partner joined in the attack.

Erza spun her sword in a circle, deflecting their attacks. She forgot, however, that Gray was attached to her arm. "Erza. Chain," he mumbled. His cheeks were puffed out in an excellent imitation of a motion-sick Natsu.

"Argh, this blasted thing!" Erza sliced at the rune chain. Both she and Gray were jolted with magical energy. It sent them flying backwards.

"Sorry kids, there's no way to break the chain. You've just got to learn to work together," Wakaba announced.

"Some people just aren't cut out for teamwork," Evergreen chipped in. Her high-pitched fake laugh stuttered to a halt when Erza glared at her.

"I'll show you who's a good team," Gray growled, dropping an Ice-Made Hammer on the sniggering duo. "Erza, you ready?" he asked.

She understood his intentions at once. "Ready!"

"Tag Team Chain Attack!" they yelled, running towards Gajeel and Juvia. They circled around them from opposite ends, wrapping the rune-chain around the two of them tightly.

"Now!" Gray said.

Erza slashed at the rune-chain. Gajeel and Juvia took the full force of the magical overload. It fritzed their systems, making them slump over.

"Strawberries?" Gray grinned at Erza.

"Not so fast," Gajeel choked out, "Iron Dragon Lance!"

Erza caught the oncoming iron fist with ease. "Hop on, Gray."

Gray obediently climbed on her back. "I," Erza yelled, spinning around in a circle, "Said." Gajeel and Juvia, attached by the rune chain, were whirled around rapidly. "LEAVE. US. ALONE!"

She let go of Gajeel's arm, sending him and Juvia flying into the air. They smashed through the roof of the guild and continued upwards. Fragments of wood floated down to the floor followed by a shower of purple sparks. Gajeel and Juvia scraped along Freed's runes as they soared. Juvia remembered from her recent encounter with them that they would not be ending any time soon.

Finally, their momentum decreased, and they came to a stop. Gajeel let out a sigh of relief, only to remember that what goes up must come down. He and Juvia began hurtling towards the floor a second later. "Aaaaaah!"

Down on ground level, Gray and Erza high-fived. "Strawberries?" she asked

Gray's reply was cut off by Gajeel's loud

scream as he and Juvia came careening down through the hole in the ceiling. A wet splash later, Gajeel was on the ground, staring up at the others through a bubble of water. Juvia's head poked miserably out of the bubble, her watery body having protected Gajeel from the fall. "It's not what it looks like, Gray-sama!" she wailed.

Gray sweatdropped and turned to Erza. "Strawberries."

"Alright contestants, your cakes should be coming out of the oven now! Only 40 minutes to go!" Mira announced.

The fighting had quieted down after the first hour. An armistice had been declared after Master Makarov had pointed out that not serving up a cake was equivalent to non-participation. Lucy had no idea what the Master's punishment entailed, but the scared reactions of the other contestants was enough to convince her of its awfulness. Natsu's tongue poked out of his mouth as he slipped the first of his fish cakes into the deep fryer.

"Natsu, I wanted to eat raw fish cakes! Lucy, look at what he's doing!"

"The cakes aren't for you," Lucy sweatdropped. The word 'cake' was being very loosely interpreted by her fellow contestants.

She and Levy pulled a wobbly cylinder from the oven. "Do you think the blue and orange squares came out properly?" Levy asked eagerly, hoping their take on a Battenberg would win them first place.

"Hmmph, is that what you call a cake, shrimp?" Gajeel said. He walked over to her table and took a sniff. He recoiled in mock horror.

"Stupid! Stupid! Stupid!" Levy pounded him with her fists all the way back to his workstation.

"Look who's talking, Gajeel" Cana sneered drunkenly from her workstation in the back. "Who makes okonomiyaki for a cake-baking competition?!"

"It's a pancake."

"More like stomach-ache."

"You want to come a little closer and say that, you drunk?"

"I'll do a whole lot more than that," Cana answered, pulling out her deck of cards.

"How about a drink first?" Max asked, ever the peacemaker. He pulled a bottle of rum out from under their workstation. They were onto their third bottle and so far only about a spoonful had gone into their cake.

"Excellent idea!" She poured a slug of rum into a measuring cup. "Piña Colada time. First the rum, then the pineapple juice," she sang, pouring in another slug of rum, "And finally, some coconut milk." She poured a pint of skim milk into the glass and proceeded to chug it down.

Gray watched her in fascinated horror. Cana's palate was not the most refined, but mistaking cow's milk for coconut milk and putting it in a Piña Colada was extreme even for her.

"Gray," Erza said.

"What's wrong?"

"We forgot the double cream for the frosting."

"Let's go get it then. We only have 30 minutes to go."

They sprinted towards the pantry. Jet and Droy were already in there, grabbing sultanas and walnuts for their fruitcake. They kept tripping and falling over, unused to the chain that bound their wrists.

"How much time do we have left?" Droy asked Erza as he brought an entire shelf down.

Erza and Gray jumped onto a high shelf to avoid the billowing clouds of flour. "Twenty-eight minutes."

"We have to get back. High speed!" Jet sped out of the pantry, dragging Droy in his wake.

"Where's the double cream?" Gray asked.

"Top right corner." She pointed upwards. Gray squinted towards the ceiling. The Fairy Tail pantry was legendary, its tall shelves extending upwards for several storeys. Almost every ingredient under the sun could be found on its shelves. One just needed to know where to look. The pantry, being off limits to non-Mira personnel, was something of a mystery to the two of them. Luckily, Erza had done a quick recon in Heaven's Wheel armour when they had come in to get strawberries earlier.

They nodded at one another and then leapt onto the counter in unison. They moved smoothly despite the chain between them. Gray grinned at Erza, "And that's how it's done."

"You were right. We do make a good team." They vaulted up to the next level of shelves, and the next, finally reaching the topmost level of the pantry. "Don't look down," Erza said.

Gray risked a peek towards the floor and then instantly reached out to cling to the shelf in front of him. "How high up are we?"

"I told you not to look." She gently touched the hand that was joined to hers. "Come on, we need to move a little to the right."

"Tch. It would be great if we could fly."

They shuffled along the shelf. It looked like this part of the pantry had not been upgraded when the guild was refurbished. Erza stepped on an old, rotting board. It gave way under her weight.

"Watch out!" Gray pulled her into his arms just in time for them to see the broken plank fall towards the ground.

"Thanks," Erza said. Then, suddenly realising their proximity, her ears began to grow pink again.

"Have you ever noticed that you blush with your ears?"

"Shut up and grab the cream." She looked away, the tips of her ears growing redder.

"Cute," remarked Gray. The word was out of his mouth before his brain could engage. He opened and closed his mouth like a goldfish, thinking desperately of a way to downplay what he had just said.

Erza blushed furiously. "I, um-eek!" Her shriek rang across the pantry as the rune-chain shortened yet again. The two of them lost their balance, toppling off the high shelf in the process.

The fall to the ground was long enough for Erza to requip into her Black-Wing Armour and

try to slow their descent. They landed with a soft thud, bodies intact, no bones broken.

Gray blinked down at the woman who had broken his fall. There was a smudge of flour on her cheek. He wiped it off with his thumb.

He should have probably asked her if she was okay. She should have probably asked him to get off her. Instead they just stared at one another. Time seemed to have come to a stop. All the lingering touches of the last two weeks had been leading up to this moment. This unplanned, fortuitous, extremely inconvenient, wonderful moment.

They were both breathing in short, rapid pants. Her cheeks were rosy, flushed with desire. His lips were inches from hers. Gray's gaze flicked down to her mouth and then back up to her eyes. They had spent the last two weeks studiously avoiding eye contact and he now knew why. He was caught up in an inferno of desire. She wanted him. Just as badly as he wanted her.

She let out a little gasp of surprise as his desire for her made itself known, pressing into her belly. Gray cursed himself. He had not even kissed her yet and he was about to come in his trousers like some unpractised teen. Plus, it was one thing to exchange caresses, another altogether to have a surprise erection bearing down on you. He blushed, embarrassed, and moved off her.

Or he tried to. In a flash, he had been flipped over and Erza was on top of him, her legs straddling his hips, her face close to his. She gave a very deliberate wriggle of her hips and Gray saw stars behind his eyes. Her breath was warm against his lips. He felt, more than saw, her armour come off. All of a sudden, her soft curves were being pressed into him. It was more than he could handle.

"I want you," they said at the same time. Lips met, teeth clashed, buttons were fumbled with; twenty minutes later, they lay panting side by side, the two of them having just been thoroughly fucked.

"Fuck me," Gray panted.

"I need a few minutes," Erza panted back. They looked at each other and burst out laughing.

A roar went up from the guild hall. "The contest!" Erza's eyes were wide. "How much time do we have left?"

"Not enough!"

They got off the floor in a panic. Gray was grateful for his stripping habit. No one would question why he was barely dressed.

"Shirt!" Erza hissed, pointing to the hickey above his left nipple.

Okay, so they might have some questions. He quickly put his clothes on.

"Mira has some magic spray whipped cream that she keeps for emergencies. We just have to find it." Erza opened and closed cupboards, searching for the item.

"Found it!" Gray said, pulling out a canister from under the sink. "Weird place to keep—"

"No time! Let's go!" Forfeiting was not an option for Fairy Tail wizards. They might have gotten side-tracked, but Erza always competed to win.

She just about managed to scrawl a spiral

on the cake with the whipped cream before the buzzer went off, signalling the end of the cook.

"It's not that bad," Gray said, seeing the disappointment on Erza's face.

A clump of cream fell off the cake and onto the plate.

"We worked hard this year. That shall have to be enough."

"True." He leaned in close to her ear and whispered, "Plus, I feel like a winner already."

There was that blush again. A guy could get used to this sort of thing.

In the kind of twist that was only possible at Fairy Tail, Gray and Erza came in third despite putting shaving foam on their cake. ("Why would you keep shaving foam in the kitchen?!" "I was helping Freed shave his head as penance for betraying the guild!").

Natsu and Happy came in second, Natsu having burned the fish cakes to a crisp and Happy having tried to make up for it by tossing raw fish on top of the plate.

Gajeel turned out to have used poisonous toadstools in his okonomiyaki. Cana ate the entire rum cake the moment her booze ran out. Levy and Lucy's cake collapsed, and it had turned out Solid Script was not very good at producing edible items.

Warren and Vijeeter ended up taking home the grand prize, the two of them being the only ones who did not try to poison the judges and/or burn off their taste buds. They split the reward; Master Makarov spent 30 minutes learning the latest dance moves and another 30 minutes listening to Warren's idea for a portable communication lacrima. All in all, it could have gone a lot worse for him.

With the excitement of the competition behind them, things returned to normal for Gray and Erza. Sort of. Except for all the sex they were suddenly having.

Erza liked to do it often, energetically and in a variety of places. Gray was pretty sure he had had sex in every back alley in Magnolia at least once. Not to mention every broom cupboard and storage room in the guild. It was the happiest he had ever been.

Things were changing for her too. She no longer spent her free time alone, pondering the conundrum of why Mystogan looked like Jellal. Gray had found her sitting by the window one day and dropped a sheaf of papers on the table. "They're not the same," he said.

"What?"

"He joined the guild a long time ago, before you. Before…" he tailed off, giving her a meaningful look.

"Oh."

He scratched the back of his neck. "I knew you were worried about it, so."

"Yes." She paused. "Thank you."

He huffed embarrassedly and walked away. She watched him go, wondering when the tingles she felt when she was around him had started to extend towards her heart.

Gray had no idea how he had ended up on Galuna Island again. He vaguely remembered being in the guild, wondering when he and Erza would next be able to sneak off. He remembered, as well, trying to pick a fight with Natsu, in the hopes that Erza would come and haul him off for some 'punishment.' Everything after that was a bit of a blur. There were flashes of blue. A blue cat. The blue sea. Blue hair. A vile tasting liquid. Had he been drugged? His thighs still burned. The demons in the village told him he had come running across the water, screaming nonsense at the horizon.

He was sitting on the beach, waiting for someone to ferry him back to the mainland when a pirate ship drew up.

"This brings back memories," Erza said. She vaulted off the ship and waded the shallows leading up to him.

"Erza."

She tangled her hands in his hair and pulled his mouth to hers. "I missed you," she said and kissed him.

There was something different about this kiss. Something scarier. He pulled away. "You missed me?" he repeated.

She gave him a curious look. "Yes."

"Oh. Okay."

The ensuing pause was uncomfortable. Erza dropped her hands and took a step back. "Do you want to come home with me? Or make your own way back?" Uncharacteristic doubt crept into her tone.

"I'll come with you." His voice was a bit off, as though he were speaking from a great distance.

She was starting to feel a bit foolish. Coming all this way was starting to feel like an overly extravagant gesture. "Do you… want to say goodbye to the villagers?"

"No, it's alright." He gestured towards the trees, where a goggle-eyed demon girl was staring at Erza.

"Ah. Right. Let's get going then."

A few strained hours later, Erza had had enough. "What is it?" she demanded, as their train pulled out of Hargeon. "You are acting strangely."

Gray shook his head. "I think I'm still a little disoriented," he lied, "I have no recollection of going to Galuna Island."

"Yes, someone used a potion on most of the guild. Everyone was caught up in their imagined rivalries. Your rival was Happy, I think."

"I see. Do you know who did it?" A vision of blue hair surfaced in his mind.

"Yes."

"And you're not mad?" Erza seemed quite calm about the fact that Juvia had unleashed a 'love' potion on the entire guild in her quest to get his attention.

"Why would I be?"

Gray blinked at her rapidly. Maybe he had been reading too much into what she had said earlier. "Why indeed," he said, relief tinging his voice.

Erza watched him carefully. "People do silly things when they are in love," she said, more to herself than to him.

Gray looked out of the window. "I wouldn't call it silly."

"Huh? Oh. Yes. I had a talk with her about consent. And Master is punishing her as we speak. She will not do it again."

"Good." He felt relieved. Juvia's attentions were hard enough to deal with without adding mind-altering potions to the mix. A cheeky grin lit up his face. "So, I've heard the bathrooms on these new trains are quite spacious," he said casually.

"Yes. You should check them out," she replied absently. Understanding dawned. "Oh."

"Yeah." His eyebrows drew together. Erza was usually the one suggesting escapades, not the one failing to pick up on obvious hints. "What's wrong?"

Erza glanced at him. They were sitting facing each other, separated by a narrow gap between the train seats. It was only then that Gray realised that she had been holding her knees away from his. "Galuna Island brings back memories."

Gray waited for her to elaborate.

Erza looked out of the window and sighed. A determined expression overtook her face, as if she had, just that second, come to a decision. She looked him straight in the eyes and said matter-of-factly, "I have feelings for you, Gray."

Alarm bells went off in his head. To say that her words frightened him would be putting it mildly. He wanted to leap out of the train and run all the way back to Galuna Island.

A thousand scenarios flashed through his mind, the nicer of which involved Erza never speaking to him again. The dark ones, the ones he did not care to dwell on, they were so much worse. Ur's face flashed before his eyes and he had to shake his head to dispel the image.

"I see," he said quietly.

She smiled at him softly. "I do not expect anything from you. I just… wanted you to know. Where I stand."

"I see."

"Things between us. They can continue as they are. Nothing has to change."

"Except it already has."

"We could pretend nothing ever happened and go back to how things were before."

"No," he blurted. As much as the thought of a relationship scared him, as much as the thought of committing himself to Erza, of letting himself feel, as much as it all scared him; he knew there was no going back. He liked the fact that he could predict her moods. He liked that he could tease her and make her blush. He liked whatever it was that they were doing. He just did not want to give a name to it. That would make it real. Making it real meant it could be taken away from him.

"You are scared," she surmised.

He nodded.

"No need to be. I mean it. I do not expect anything from you."

He gave her a sceptical look.

"Are you accusing me of lying, Gray?" Her battle-aura flared around her.

He bit back a laugh. "Never, Erza."

"Good." She grinned at him. "Want to check out those bathrooms?"

"Are you sure we should be going on a mission together?"

"Why?" Erza asked, buttoning up his shirt.

"Oh, it's just that you can't think straight when I'm near you," Gray said.

She did up the button on his collar, almost choking him. "Are you never going to stop teasing me about that?"

"Never, ever," he replied, leaning in to kiss her. "Ever."

She turned away to see to her own clothing. "I like the sound of that."

The bartender set down a mug of beer and a tumbler of whiskey, the clink of glass on wood lost in the bustle of the bar. Gray took a deep breath of the cigarette smoke that permeated the place and felt a pang of longing. The upside of traipsing all the way to Onibus was that there were no concerned guildmates hovering over him, worried that living vicariously would not be enough for him where the cancer sticks were concerned. The downside of course, was the company.

"Drink up, buddy! It's a rare thing for me to be out in the human world and I have my sight set on meeting some ladies!" Loke slapped him on the back enthusiastically.

"Why couldn't we have met ladies in Magnolia? I can't just materialise in different geographical locations, you know."

Loke gave him a sheepish look and took a sip of his whiskey.

"You've dated them all?" Gray asked incredulously.

He coughed discreetly. "A gentleman never kisses and tells."

"What about a Celestial Spirit?"

Loke laughed and slipped onto the barstool next to Gray. "What's up with you, buddy? You look even moodier than usual."

Gray took a sip of his beer. Then, a swig. Then, he downed the entire mug and asked for another. "There's this-, I have this-" He huffed, annoyed that he could not find a good way to begin. "I have this friend."

"Go on."

"And hypothetically there is a girl."

"An imaginary friend and a hypothetical girl? This is more serious than I thought."

Gray glared at him. "It's not funny."

"You're right. Do go on."

"Say he and this girl were hypothetically, sort of… involved."

"Screwing."

Gray blushed and cleared his throat. "And the girl tells him that she has feelings for him-"

Loke sucked in a breath. "Bold move. You lose all your power the minute you admit that you want something more."

"Really? Then why is it that I feel so powerless?"

Loke raised his eyebrows at his slip. Gray turned away and stared into his beer. "She said she has feelings for him, but that she doesn't expect anything from him. At all."

"But she expects something anyway?"

"No! She really, truly, doesn't. Things have gone back to the way they were before she said… you know. It's almost like that conversation never happened."

"Then what's the problem?"

"The problem is, how long can it last? How long before she wises up and realises that she can do better, be with someone who can actually commit, and this guy loses the best thing that has ever happened to him?"

Loke took a contemplative sip of his drink. "If it's the best thing that has ever happened to this guy, then why won't he commit?"

Gray did not respond. He slowly tore the beer mat in front of him into strips, and then set to work shredding them. A tiny pile of confetti grew before him.

"Is it maybe, that this guy is scared that she'll be taken away from him if he does?"

Gray looked up sharply at the question. He reached for another beer mat.

"And so, he pretends to himself that he doesn't feel anything, because that way, he can protect her. Even if he knows it's stupid and illogical."

Loke's remark was met with further silence. The bartender was eyeing the growing pile of paper in front of the two men with increasing misgiving.

"But maybe the guy is just being a jerk. And is toying with this girl's feelings. Coz sex is great, and no strings attached sex is even greater. Big whoop if she likes you, that's her problem. Not yours. You just have to use her and lose her. That's probably all she's worth anywa—"

"Shut up!" Gray grabbed Loke by the collar. "You have no idea what you're talking about."

Loke's eyes glinted behind his spectacles. "Maybe not."

Gray took a deep breath and released his friend.

"Love is a tricky thing," Loke mused, "you can do your best to protect the person you love, and they can be taken from you anyway. Does that mean you never love?

"Who knows, Gray. Maybe you'll end up like me, unable to be with the person you love. Dating a series of women because you can't stand your own loneliness, or the gaping void in your heart that she left."

"Well, that sounds fucking grim," Gray replied, draining his beer.

Loke snorted. "You're not that kid anymore. And this girl… she can take care of herself." He returned Gray's surprised look with a knowing one. "Just like Ur could. Let go of the solipsistic belief that you're responsible for other people's choices."

Gray sat silently for a long time, considering Loke's words. Finally, he scoffed and signalled to the bartender for another round of drinks. "Just because you use fancy words, doesn't mean you're talking sense," he said.

The ghost of a smile edged its way across his face.

"When did things change for you?" he asked, playing with her hair. She was on the other side of his bed, her face half obscured by the pillow she was lying on. She stared at the ceiling for a long time, silent. He wondered if perhaps he should not have brought up the subject. In case it was a sore point.

"After the Tower came down, things were different for me. I was finally free to let go of the past. For the first time ever, I had a future to think of. And I thought of you," she said. "But if you're asking when I started thinking of you differently, then the answer is…" her voice drifted off as she considered the answer.

"Galuna Island," she said finally.

"What? Because I stood up to you?" Somehow the idea did not sit well with him. Erza was not so much of a tyrant that a little disobedience would grab her attention.

"No." She paused and smiled at him softly. "You had conviction."

He turned on his side so he could see her more clearly.

She sighed. "You now know about my past. To see that kind of conviction in someone else... it made me feel like I was not alone. That you would understand the things about me that I thought were unloveable."

Her eyes widened as she realised that maybe she had said too much. She turned on her side, away from him. "It's late. We're leaving for a mission early tomorrow. Go to bed."

The tips of her ears were pink again. He wrapped his arm around her waist and pulled her to him. She fit perfectly against him; soft and warm but strong and unbreakable. He pressed a kiss into her hair. "Good night."

He could hear the smile in her voice when she replied, "Good night."

And now, as he watched Erza sway towards another table, in that garish orange uniform, he wondered what on earth he had done to deserve this much happiness.

Erza caught his eye in the mirror on the back wall and smiled. She leaned over a table, her upper arms coming together under her breasts, pushing them upwards.

The man at the table looked like he was about to cream himself, which earned him a death glare from Gray.

Erza watched his face change in the mirror and laughed.

"I am going on break," she called to Yaji-

ma-san, undoing her apron and placing it over the back of a chair. She glanced briefly at Gray and left the building.

Thirty seconds later, the restaurant mysteriously ran out of eggs and Gray left on an urgent errand to locate some.

"Took you long enough." Erza grabbed him as he went past and pulled him behind a stack of abandoned crates.

"You don't usually have complaints when I'm not quick," he smirked.

Erza growled and pulled him to her. "You better be quick now, or I might explode."

"Really?" Gray asked. He flipped up her skirt and slid his hand down her belly. His fingers met damp curls and he swore under his breath. "No underwear?"

"I thought I might flash you at work today, but the opportunity never came up." She looked almost sad.

"There's always the afternoon."

"I have something else planned for then," she shrugged.

"You're going to kill me," he said and kissed her.

Their kissing was frenzied; their hands running over each other's bodies, grasping and groping. Erza slid her tongue into Gray's mouth, stroking it over his.

She sometimes wondered if she could really be content if her life with Gray remained secret assignations and night-time trysts. She had thought that she would never love again. Not after the last time. Yet here she was. Could she really be sure in her conviction that this was enough? Somehow, she thought, yes. As long as she could be close to him, she would be happy.

She pressed him into the wall of the alleyway, pressing her hips into his. Her hands slipped under the waistband of his boxers, coming to rest cupped around his arse. "I have been thinking of this all morning," she said, tickling the backs of his thighs.

Gray flipped her, so that her back was against the wall. He ran his hands up the curve of her waist, over her firm breasts, up to the neckline of her uniform. "Just all morning? I've been thinking of doing this since last night," he said in between kisses to her collar bone. A sharp tug and her breasts bounced free.

"I was with you last night."

"I didn't get enough of you," he said. He took her nipple in his mouth, sucking on it gently. "I don't think I can ever get enough of you."

Her blush spread all the way down her chest, down to the hardened buds he was lavishing his attention on. He nipped at her breasts, eliciting small gasps of pleasure from her. She ran her nails along his back before grabbing his head and pulling his face back up to hers. She took his lower lip in between her teeth and sucked, making the blood rush to his groin.

He pulled one of her legs high around his waist, drawing circles on the inside of her knee. She grabbed him by his elastic waistband and pulled him closer to her. "Touch me," she breathed.

"I thought you'd never ask." He slipped his hand up her skirt and squeezed her bum, before trailing his way to her front. "Here?" he

teased, brushing against her thigh.

She growled impatiently.

"Here?" He brushed his thumb along her hip bone.

She squirmed in his arms. "Please."

He traced a line down her soft skin, until he met the warm, wetness between her thighs. A gasp shuddered between her lips. His fingers moved in firm, gentle strokes, sliding in between her wet folds with ease. He flicked the nub at her apex, relishing the mewling sounds the action drew from her.

"More," she demanded, wrapping her leg around him more tightly.

His mouth kissed its way, hot and wet, between the valley of her breasts. He pressed his thumb to her clit and slipped inside her. Her walls instinctively tightened around his rough finger. Her hands grabbed at his back, signalling her need for more. He slid another finger into her, working her into a lather of tightly wound pleasure. She ground down onto his hand. "Give me more," she said, swinging her other leg around his waist and leaning into him to keep her balance.

Gray steadied himself by placing a hand on the wall. He slipped a third finger inside her, pushing them in and out of her while his thumb drummed a rhythm on her nub. She buried her face in his shoulder to muffle her moans as she came.

She stayed motionless for a few seconds, breathing heavily. "That was amazing," she said. She bit his shoulder, before raising her head to look at him with shining eyes.

Gray licked the wetness from his fingers. "We're not done yet," he said, pressing her against the wall and grinding against her.

The bulge in his trousers felt deliciously hard. She materialised a foil-wrapped package from her pocket dimension. "I never said we were."

He slipped his hands under her bare bottom to hold her in place while she pushed his boxers down his hips with her toes.

She ran her hands over his abdomen, up to his chest. His breath hitched as she flicked a nipple. "Save the foreplay for when we're not on a job," he muttered.

She laughed at his impatience. She reached down and wrapped her hand around his already erect member and pumped. The tip of her thumb ran slowly up the underside of his shaft, stopping to flick it just under the head. He swore under his breath.

"Language," she chided. She ripped the foil open with her teeth and expertly rolled the condom down his length. She guided him into her, a sharp exhale whistling through her lips at the exquisite fullness of him.

He drove into her, fast and hungry. Erza wrapped her arms around him, grabbing his butt, pulling him closer, deeper with every thrust. She tugged on his ear lobe with her teeth, angling his head so that he could hear the moans she was trying to bite back. Her tremulous voice and the slick warmth between her legs almost tipped him over the edge.

He pushed her harder against the wall. He supported her weight with one hand and lifted her leg over his shoulder. Slowing his pace, he took his time with her. Cold air whispered over him as he withdrew from her, making her heat

all the more glorious when he plunged back in. Over and over, moving in time with unheard music. His fingers dug into the soft flesh of her derriere. He wanted to savour this. He wanted her to savour this. Her eyes widened with pleasure every time he drove into her. She clenched around him, her rhythm matching his thrusts. Gray gave a low moan and buried his face in her neck.

One of her hands fisted itself in his hair. She ran her nails along his scalp and then tugged gently on the hair at the back of his head. They kissed each other, drinking greedily from each other's lips. His heartbeat thrummed under her palm as she squeezed herself around him.

Her heels dug into his back, telling him to pick up the pace again. A staccato of moans fell, uncontrolled, from her lips, their cadences keeping time with his thrusts. Her fingernails dug into his back as she came undone. He squeezed her arse, gripping her tightly as pleasure flooded his body. He slowed as he emptied himself, his breaths coming in short puffs.

He gave her a minute to catch her breath, then gently set her down on her feet. She kept her hands on his shoulders, her legs not yet steady enough to hold her weight.

Gray kissed her, once, twice and then thrice. "Good?"

She nodded, still breathing heavily. "Good." She looked down, between their bodies. "I am not putting that in my pocket dimension. Not after what happened last time."

Gray thought back to the afternoon they had spent the previous week, cleaning cum off her armour. It had only led to them getting more cum on her armour. Albeit this time, she had been wearing it when it had happened. Had he mentioned Erza was kind of kinky?

"We're behind a restaurant, there's a bin right here," Gray chuckled. He tied off the condom and tossed it into the dumpster on the other side of the restaurant door.

"Oh. Yes. I forgot." It was a rare occasion that he discombobulated Erza enough for her to forget her surroundings. He felt a surge of pride at his sexual prowess.

Erza caught the expression on his face and huffed. The tips of her ears went pink. Gray did not think he would ever tire of seeing that happen. "Put your clothes on," she said.

Erza tugged her uniform back into place and smoothed out her skirt, then materialised a carton eggs from her pocket dimension. "This had better not have made a mess in there," she said sternly.

"It was your idea for a cover!" he protested, buttoning up the fly on his boxers.

She ignored him. "Wait five minutes before you follow me in."

"Wait." He grabbed her by the waist to hold her steady. He dropped to his knees. "I need a hit before you go."

His head disappeared up her skirt. She laughed, confused, but then parted her legs anyway. Gray buried his nose in her curls and took a deep breath. "That's the stuff," he said and kissed her.

She looked at him, bemused, when he emerged from under her skirt. It hit him then, so he said it before he could overthink it. "I love you."

Her mouth fell open for a second. She re-

covered before he got to his feet. "I see," she said.

"Yes."

"I love you too."

"Stop grinning like that. Everyone will know," he scolded, grinning back at her.

The smile vanished from her face. "We are not going to tell them. Right?"

"Never. Ever."

"Lucy will never stop asking me questions."

"Macao and Wakaba will never let me live it down."

The exchanged a horrified glance and said at the same time. "Juvia."

"Maybe we will tell Juvia."

He paled, flashing back to the Love Potion Incident. "Why?"

"I think she just wants Gray-sama to be happy."

Gray considered this for a moment and realised that maybe she was right. But that would be a bridge to cross when he got to it. Realising he was in love with his childhood friend was enough of an upheaval for one day. "You know, the '-sama' doesn't sound so bad when you say it."

"Oh?" she said, a scary mask descending upon her features.

"Only when there is an 'Erza' in front of it," he hastily backtracked.

She chuckled. "Come here, you've got something on your face."

"What?"

She licked his cheek and slid her tongue into his mouth. The slightly tangy taste of her juices was unmistakeable. "Oh," he said, when she pulled away.

"You've got some on the other side as well." She grabbed his chin to angle his head and gave his other cheek a long, slow lick. She was about to lean in and kiss him again when-

"W-what's going on here?" Lucy stuttered.

"Busted," Gray whispered to Erza. Somehow, despite the fact that they had been dreading it a second ago, it did not seem so bad to either of them.

Erza bit her lip to stop from laughing. "Play along," she whispered back. She cleared her throat. "Ah. Good day, Lucy." The marionette arms were back. "Gray had something on his face."

"Whipped cream," he offered unhelpfully.

She glared at him. "Yes, whipped cream."

"And you know how much Erza likes whipped cream."

More glaring. "Yes. I was just helping him clean his face. Ah, what is that Yajima-sama?" She held a palm to her ear exaggeratedly. "Ah I will be right there!" She smiled a rictus at them all and robotically marched back inside. Gray was barely able to hold back his laughter.

He watched her go, a dopey expression overtaking his features. Love. How stupid of him to have been terrified of it. "Wait for me," he said, running after her.

by prestocrayon

The two of them dodged around Natsu and stepped through the entryway, smiling goofily at each other.

"What was that all about?" Lucy asked Natsu.

Natsu wrinkled his nose. The gears in his brain slowly clicked into place.

"Natsu? Are you okay?" She peered at him concernedly.

But Natsu had burst, quite literally, into flames.

Safe and Sound -

Gray watched her carefully, taking note of the barely noticeable tremble in her legs, the bruises lining her arms and the way her feet dragged along the dirt path.

Whether Lucy and Natsu didn't notice or chose not to comment aloud for fear of Erza's wrath, Gray didn't know, but the two had settled farther up ahead, choosing to take care of building a small campfire and searching for food.

Erza slowly tried lowering herself onto a protruding rock opposite of him, but the arm she had been supporting herself with gave out suddenly, and she was falling forward onto the rock until a firm hand grabbed her waist.

She looked up, locking eyes with the concerned dark ones of none other than the ice mage. He carefully helped her sit down on the rock, the stony surface being covered with Gray's jacket he'd thrown over it so she wouldn't sit on cold stone.

"Thank you." The words were heavy with gratitude, a sincerity Erza never failed to show in moments of vulnerability like this.

He nodded, slowly removing his hands from her waist and arm after making sure Erza had found her balance.

She sat like she always sat, prim and proper, legs pressed together to one side and hands folded onto her lap.

Gray sighed, sitting opposite of her on his smaller sized rock, and cleared his throat. "You should get checked up on before we head out."

Erza gave a small smile, "I'm fine, Gray. Cobra's magic isn't coursing through me anymore."

The ice mage frowned deeply, feeling the beginning sparks of annoyance flare up in his chest, "Erza, you can't be serious, you almost died today!"

The small smile still remained on her lips and she looked off to the side. "I survived, didn't I? It was thanks to you that I managed to be cured in time. For that, I'm in your debt, Gray."

by Scarlet RedFox

"Like hell you are." The red-haired teen turned her head at the spat out words, eyes reflecting her surprise at the normally composed mage's outburst. "Lyon wanted to cut your arm off! If I hadn't been there, you'd have let him!"

She frowned at that, lips pulled into a thin line. "It was necessary to continue with the mission."

Gray snarled. "I don't give a damn about the stupid mission!" Erza glanced towards the ice mage in silent displeasure, showing him without words how she disagreed with his statement. Her friend didn't seem too care too much about her glare. "Your life depended on it! And you almost threw it away like an idiot!"

The knight's gaze lowered to the side, hands tightening into fists on her lap. "Gray-"

He cut her off with a huff, standing tall with crossed arms and a peeved look. "You were reckless! Fighting against Cobra with no one to help you! It was two against one! You're strong Erza, but he was a dragon slayer! Natsu should've helped you fight against him!"

She shook her head. "Then he would've tried poisoning Natsu as well."

Gray's fists shook and he jumped to his feet in anger, gaze never wavering from the redhead. "Natsu would've been *fine*, maybe his dragon slayer magic would've repelled the attack or fought the effects! You can't say the same for yourself, not Lucy or me either! Erza, you —"

"*It's alright if its only me Gray!*" Erza's sudden outcry froze Gray mid-sentence, dark eyes flying open in shock when she glared up at him fiercely, tired in body but her mind was still as sharp as a blade, still ready to fight. "I can't allow any of you to be grievously injured. I can still fight with one arm, you need both arms to use your magic! Natsu and Lucy do too. I can use my swords with my feet if I have to! It doesn't matter." Her hair fell to cover the side of her face and it abruptly brought Gray to a time in their childhood.

Back when she'd first arrived in the guild, her short hair had covered her face to shield her from the outside world, it had protected her from the things she was uncomfortable with.

But not today.

Not with him.

Not *again.*

Gray took a step forward, far closer than he would've dared in the past, but they weren't little kids anymore. His hands grabbed Erza's shoulders firmly but gently, his serious gaze meeting her surprised one. "Don't you get it? There are people out there who want to see you *safe and sound*!"

Erza's gaze was unflinching, voice rising to match his own one. "And how do *you* know that?"

It didn't even take a moment, it took less than second for his mind to shut down and his emotions, the emotions he rarely allowed free reign, to take over.

Gray pulled her to him, pressing her tightly against his body, chest heaving shakily at the terrifying picture still burned into the back of his mind like a bad dream; Erza collapsed on the ground, arm glowing a sickening purple with the poison coursing through her blood.

His voice sounded weaker and quieter than he preferred, but he couldn't bring himself to care at this point, instead he only hugged her tighter, burying his face into her scarlet tresses. "Because *I* am one of those people, Erza."

The girl in his arms fell quiet, eyes wide in shock. It wasn't just from the sudden embrace, but from the overflow of emotions from them both.

Erza's arms rose and for a moment, Gray thought she would hit him.

Until she *didn't*.

They slipped through his own raised arms and clutched tightly at his bare back, his shirt long since discarded somewhere, her face pressed against his shoulder.

The ice mage felt the warm wetness slowly trickle down his chest as the woman in his arms remained close, small shivers wracking her body.

Gray's back was turned to the glowing fire.

To Natsu and Lucy who respectfully kept their eyes away.

To Happy who was oddly focused on the dense forest instead of the fish in his paws.

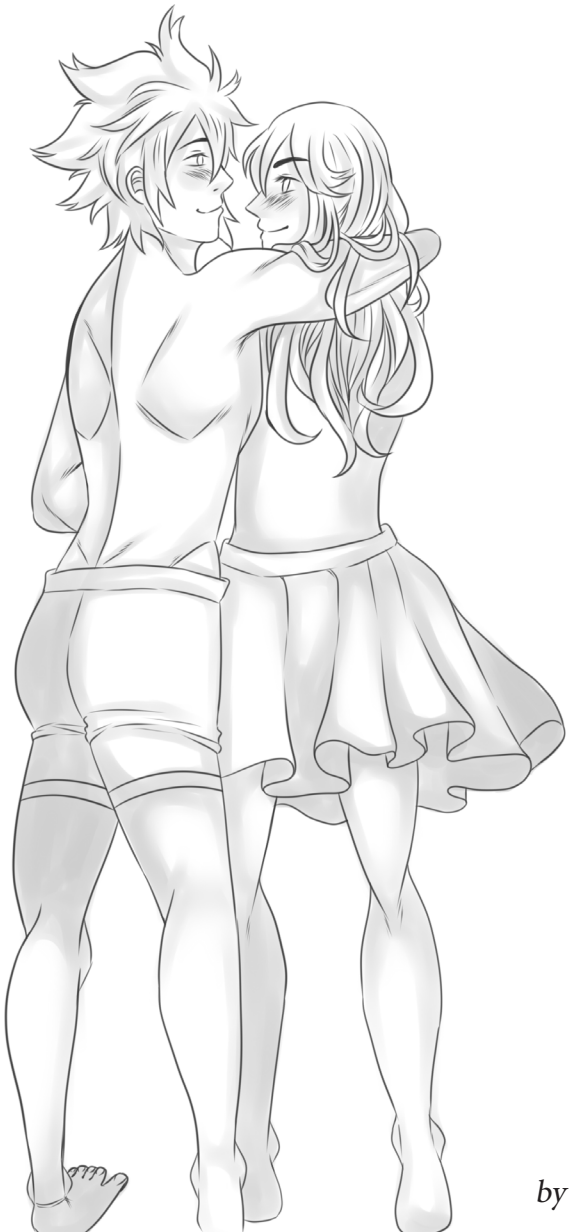
To act as the shield replacing Erza's armour.

Gray moved one hand to tenderly cradle the back of her head, clutching at her so desperately he thought she would turn to thin air if he didn't hold her tightly enough.

The most reassuring thing though, was the fact that her own hands wrapped around him.

They were clutching him just as tightly, just as *desperately*.

And Gray couldn't remember a time when he felt more at home.



Bonus...

Natsu chewed loudly on the meat from the boar he caught, watching the two embracing mages and Lucy slapped his arm, "Natsu! Stop chewing so loudly!"

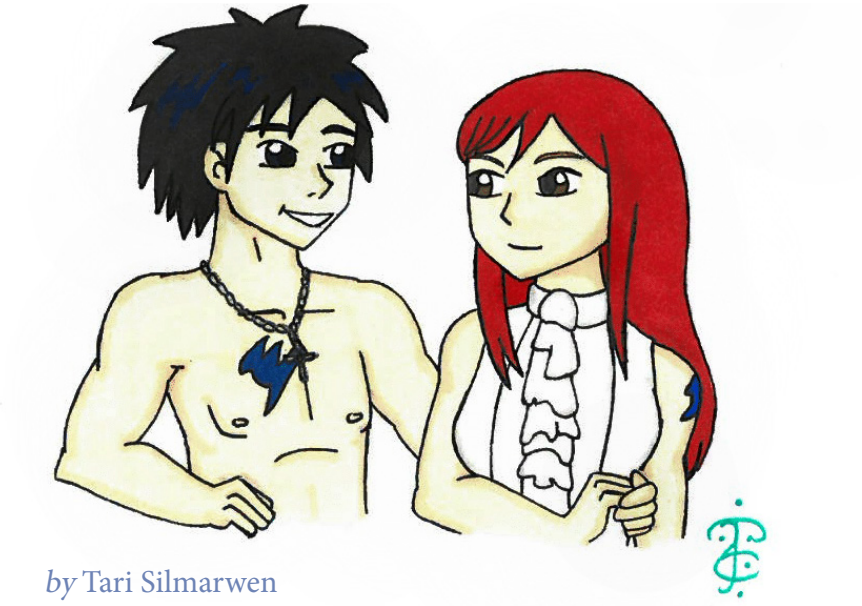
Ignoring the celestial spirit wizard's complaint, the pink haired teen took another noisy bite out of his food, "You think they'll join us?"

Happy covered his mouth, snickers escaping him boundlessly, "I don't think so Natsu, they're *busy*-"

"Quiet, you stupid cat!" Lucy waved her fist at the feline, who quickly grabbed his freshly caught fish and hid behind the oblivious dragon slayer for protection. His gaze was trained on Erza and Gray.

He smiled contently when they remained locked within each-other's arms, Lucy and Happy's bickering only a background noise.

by Sou



by Tari Silmarwen

Boundaries

by boogey56

It wasn't hard to find her.

It was never hard for Gray to find her.

And after what had happened, the whirlwind of battles and adventures with the Oracion Seis and the other guilds, the team had needed to decompress, to process. Erza was no exception, and she had an especially difficult trauma to come to terms with. Gray really couldn't care about what happened to that man — he deserved prison and probably more — but he hurt for Erza.

As predicted, she sat alone at the riverbank, a lone silhouette against the afternoon sun reflecting off the water. The local wildlife went about their business, unconcerned, as they were used to her visits. The long grass swayed a bit in the breeze, equally unconcerned. Only Gray's stomach clenched.

The scene was peaceful, idliac.

Picking his way down the slope, careful not to kick up any rocks or dirt clods but making enough noise not to startle her, he stood patiently for a moment to gauge his welcome.

She didn't make him wait long.

"You made a decision for me that went counter to my expressed wishes. Who are you to do that, Gray?"

"Your friend, and it worked out!" Gray retorted softly, gut churning harder and fists clenched. He added in a gentler tone with some effort as he lowered himself to sit because she hadn't told him to go away, "Wendy saved you. And she saved your arm too."

Silence answered him, her gaze still off across the water and body held tight. The scene may have been idliac, but Erza wasn't. But that's why he was here, right? Gray knew plenty about grief, and she shouldn't have to deal with grief like this alone.

Up and down, up and down. Her battle-scarred fingers traced the peachy tenderness of new skin. Not a scar, not yet, but soon. The snake's strike had hit hard, hit true, and magic could only heal so much. Erza would never be able to forget her brush with the poison that nearly took her arm and her life.

"You did not know Wendy could do that." Erza stated it matter-of-fact, without accusation. The bite left her voice and she just sounded melancholy, reflective. Gray squirmed, remembering the aftermath of the Tower of Heaven. It had an eerie echo of deja vu to it.

He knew why. He knew it wasn't about her arm or Wendy. He knew she was grappling with things that didn't concern him. He wasn't a fool. But he certainly felt like a scapegoat for the ill actions of someone else, continuing this charade of a conversation.

It was time to make a graceful exit, before words were exchanged that couldn't be taken back. Before he heard things that wounded his heart more, in a way a friend shouldn't be wounded.

Abruptly her fingers stopped, expression shifting from far off to the present, triggered by his shifting weight, "Neither did I or anyone else. It was a very risky gamble, Gray."

"You think that didn't occur to me, Erza? That I was making the wrong choice? That if you died, it would be my fault?" the man retorted, feeling backed into a corner. He'd come out to the riverbank to console her, to see if she needed a shoulder to cry on or someone to talk to. "That if you died, I'd have to live with that hanging over my head for the rest of my life? Do you know all the what-ifs that went through my head, that keep going through my head, that haunt my thoughts at night? What was I supposed to do, just let him hack your arm off with a sword? That could have killed you too!"

After things had worked out alright, it should've been easy to justify his choices to stop Lyon, to take a risk that wasn't his to risk. But it wasn't an easy justification. He'd overruled someone's body autonomy, and who was he to do that? Not her mother, not her doctor, not her lover or husband.

A friend.

A good friend, but a friend.

He'd overstepped in his desperation. But he wasn't going to apologize for that, and he wasn't going to take back or change it.

Ruffling his hair with a hand, he tried a different tact, "Erza, we've known each other a long time. Don't you trust me yet?"

"Trust?" the woman echoed, a note of puzzlement entering her voice. "Of course I trust you."

"How much do you remember from when you first came to Fairy Tail?"

She arched a brow but humored him hesitantly, "My memories are… incomplete. I do remember you being a brat though."

"Haha. Do you remember your eye? About your eye, about losing your eye. Because I do. I remember watching helplessly as you cried about losing it. I remember feeling like scum because someone had hurt you and I couldn't make it better. It was ugly, Erza. You probably repressed all those memories but I still have them, clear as yesterday. That was an eye. Now imagine losing your arm - if you lost that arm, you would've lost your sense of self - a different kind of loss of life. And I couldn't let that happen to you. Not again. This time I could do something. I could save you from that pain and suffering. This time."

"A bit selfish," she reflected mildly, hand going to her prosthetic eye, tracing the lid pensively, gingerly as if it still hurt a bit despite the years.

Gray grunted, unable to deny that.

"But noble," the woman added with a wisp of a smile on her lips, her way of saying things were back to normal again between them. When she softened, he melted a bit.

He flashed a crooked grin in return, relief flooding every atom of his being. All was forgiven, all was well.

Reaching down, he plucked up some flowers, deftly fashioning them into a crown. His fingers only stumbled once or twice, forgetting what he'd learned so many years in the past. The results were passable, charming. The flowers were yellow, not white, and there were more than enough to make a crown not a bracelet, for they weren't buried in snow and weighed down with frost. These were flowers of warmth and sun. Much like the woman before him.

"Gray —"

"For the lovely Queen Titania, a crown," he announced grandly, with a mischievous grin.

Knowing she couldn't block him with her injured arm, he let the crown fall across her hair, fingers tangling a bit as he pulled his hand back. Maybe a bit on accident, maybe a bit on purpose, and maybe they lingered too long.

His fingers itched to pick apart the small knots he saw, teased into being by the wind. But he let them fall, empty. She would probably ask one of the girls, maybe Lucy or Cana, to help her brush her hair out later tonight.

"Stop that with the title." She made no move to take the crown off, reachi up with her good arm to touch the petals. "You always know when I need you. Thank you. For the talk, and the crown as well. And for always being there."

Before he could say anything, she leaned forward, brushing a kiss across his cheek and pressed a finger to silence his protests.

Brushing off the chuff and grass, she stood, extending a hand down, and Gray didn't pause for a moment to take it. After all, she trusted him, and he trusted her. That's just how it was, and he hoped that's how it would always be

edit *by* gaymirajane

Parallel Worlds, Intersecting Lives

by Artku

by watcher-ofthe-sky

@watcher-ofthe-sky

"You're way too sticky," Gray said, observing the woman beside him with narrowed eyes. Shock and despair fluttered across her face before she realised that he was looking at the bun in her hand. "Can't you eat more neatly?" he asked.

"It is Juvia's first time eating this, so…" she mumbled, poking at the bread. A long thread of viscous sauce came away with her finger.

Bisca and Alzack could not help but stare. Had they been… flirting? Bisca dreamt of a day when she could be as demonstrative as Juvia. A vision of Alzack feeding her from a homemade bento box floated across her mind.

"This is how you eat caramade franks!" Gray declared, "Like this, open your mouth up wide!" He practically unhinged his jaw and stuffed the bread in his mouth.

"I see, like this." Juvia copied him, her cheeks puffing out like a hamster's.

"Exactly. This isn't something that's meant to be eaten politely!" His shirt had vanished somewhere between the two sentences. Bisca saw it hanging from the rafters and marvelled at the efficacy and scope of his *de trop* skill.

"Juvia doesn't think it's a good idea to take off her clothes, though."

Bisca felt heat creep into her cheeks. Had Gray just insinuated that Juvia should strip? She wondered how she could possibly get Alzack to be as bold. Her eyes caught his and they both blushed crimson. "Th-the rain just won't let up, eh?" she said nervously. Mavis wept; she was never going to make any progress with Alzack at this rate.

"Y-yeah," he replied, just as feebly. Bisca wondered if it was a western continent problem, or just an Alzack problem because why, oh why, could he never string together two words to make conversation with her?

"You two seem to be as close as ever."

She jumped away from her partner as though burned. "Erza-san!" she squeaked.

"N-no, that's-" Alzack stuttered uselessly, as he was wont to do.

Erza just smiled at them. "Treasure these moments. So that you won't have regrets," she said. Master Makarov waved her over and she nodded at them before leaving. Bisca thought she caught the ghost of a wink as Erza walked away. She shook her head. She had probably imagined it.

Gray watched the exchange through hooded eyes. His throat ran dry and the morsel of bread in his mouth seemed to swell up. He found himself having to choke it down. He heard the underlying meaning to her words and wondered when, if ever, she would get over Jellal. He pushed the rest of his snack away, his appetite suddenly lost.

He could feel Juvia's curious gaze on him, but he ignored her, as he always did; he had only ever had eyes for one person. He watched her speak to the old geezer, her back ramrod straight and as unyielding as ever. He thought that maybe he should take her advice and be forthright about his feelings.

"Juvia."

"Y-yes, Gray-sama?" She looked so hopeful and hopelessly in love with him. It chafed.

"You're blocking the way," he said curtly.

He strode off, leaving her in a crumpled heap on the floor. He tried not to care, he really did, but something about her patheticness was too painfully familiar. He turned and gave her a guilty, half-hearted smile. He regretted it instantly when the light returned to her eyes. Maybe one day he would learn that he had to be cruel to be kind. In this, as in that other thing, he remained foolishly optimistic.

He heard Erza excuse herself from her conversation with the Master. He slipped into the kitchen, deserted now that Mira was tending

the bar. She followed him in a discreet five minutes later. "You acquitted yourself admirably, Gray. I believe our plan worked."

Her eyes were shining, and it tickled him that the strong, stoic Erza was such a romantic at heart. "Do you think it will be enough to make Bisca and Alzack take the final step?" he asked.

He somehow doubted it, but when Erza had presented the scheme to him that morning he had seen no choice but to go along with it. "Why can't you do it?" he had asked, a bit petulantly.

"Don't be silly Gray, you and Juvia are much more believable together," she had answered blithely and off he had gone, like an obedient dog, to rope an unsuspecting Juvia into the plan. He wished she had less power over him.

"I hope so," Erza replied with a pout. "They are wasting time."

He wondered then, if he was the unsuspecting one. That maybe there had been two facets to this scheme of hers and Bisca and Alzack had only been one. He opened his mouth to tell her to stop pushing him towards Juvia but the words that spilled forth were different. "Erza, what you said. 'Treasure these moments so that you won't have regrets.' I… I don't want to regret anything either."

He seemed so unlike himself as he spoke the words. The seriousness and earnestness in his voice were as foreign as a feminist in Quattro Cereberus. It disquieted Erza. The spectre of a tangled and messy future loomed before her.

"What do you mean?" she asked. She hoped the affected puzzlement in her voice would serve as an adequate deterrent.

Gray looked away and ran a hand through his hair. A multitude of expressions fleeted just under his skin, as though he was at war with himself. In the end, his jaw clenched, a victor decided. The look on his face scared her. She knew that regardless of who had won that battle, the ultimate loser that day was going to be her.

"I want to treasure my moments with you," he said solemnly, "Because Erza, I-"

He was cut short by a tremor rumbling through the guild. Erza wondered if maybe it was divine intervention. He folded her into his arms and bent his head over hers, instinctively moving to protect her. She trembled but she was not sure if it was because of what had almost passed or because of what was going to. The shelves lining the walls around them rattled and pots and pans crashed to the tiles below; filling the air with the music of the world ending. Her hands found their way around his waist and anchored themselves in his shirt.

The next thing she knew, she was lying on the ground and Gajeel was staring down at her.

What happened next left no time for conversation. Gray and Erza were plunged into battle, fighting a fight they knew nothing about, save for the fact that their friends were in danger. Gray rushed to protect them, because that was what he did. He was a fighter. He had been fighting all his life. And he would be damned if he did not take every one of his nakama back to the guild with him.

When, in the midst of battle, Mystogan revealed himself as the prince of Edolas, Gray felt the acrid taste of black coffee flood his mouth. Sharp and dark, slipping down to churn acidly in his stomach. Of course, the handsome bastard was a prince. Even in a parallel world, he still could not beat Jellal. Maybe he was getting tired of trying.

She was on his mind even as he fought for his life. "Where is Erza?" he asked Charle.

"She's where the other Erza is."

Gray could dimly make out her slight figure on top of the flying beast that the people of Edolas called Legions. He debated going to help her, but they were attacked by Edolas' army before he could make up his mind. She probably did not need rescuing anyway. She never did.

They were overrun. Try as he might, he just could not keep up. He lost count of the number of enemies he had taken down, yet more still came. He wondered if it was the end for him, if this would be how he died; in a foreign world, fighting to protect his friends in someone else's war, half a sentence from telling the girl her loved how he felt.

When Edolas' Fairy Tail appeared to save the day, declaring that they were not going to run anymore, Gray thought that maybe he should stop running too. Stop running from the inevitability of his unrequited love. Perhaps it really had been divine intervention that had stopped him earlier that day.

She would never love him. And she would never know just how much he loved her. Maybe that was for the best.

He noticed the way his Edolas counterpart looked at his Juvia and thought snidely that maybe there was a future after this heartbreak. It almost made him laugh.

The world around him had gone grey and dull, like an out of focus image on a lacrima-cam. He would have liked to blame it on the magic being sucked away, but he knew that was not it. The colour had leeched from his life. No more Scarlet. Just Gray.

What happened next left no time for conversation. Gray and Erza were plunged into battle, fighting a fight they knew nothing about, save for the fact that their friends were in danger. When Erza found herself face to face with a woman who looked exactly like her, she did not know what to think. Erza Knightwalker's face was twisted and cruel and so strange to her because it was her face, her lips that were saying such deplorable things. It felt like an omen. She battled her way forward and felled the soulless imitation of herself. But Erza Knightwalker was as tenacious as Erza Scarlet. She would not give up. She hunted her down.

Erza saw in Knightwalker who she could have become without the guild. Without Gray. He had been the first person to knock on her walls and demand entrance to the fortress she had built around her heart. The first person to breach her defences and make her trust again. Her first friend in her new life. She had often wondered what she would have been like if not for Gray.

The answer stared her in the face.

She hated it. She hated that Knightwalker was so much like her and yet was nothing like her. She was an incomplete facsimile; as

though the artist's brush had grown tired in the reproduction and filled the page with black instead of the rich tapestry of emotions Erza knew dwelt in her heart.

She could hate as much as Knightwalker. She knew the depths that lay unexplored beneath the injustice of her childhood. But he had never let her reach them. He had taught her to love. They all had. Perhaps it had been Fairy Tail and not some divine artist that had filled in her pages with joy and laughter and warmth. With love. She knew then, that Knightwalker could love too. "You've got the same evil and weakness in you that I have," she said, "So you must also have the same heart that is capable of loving others."

She could not win against her. Facing the shadow of who she could have been, she wanted nothing more than to show her the promise the future held. Darkness and light, cold and warmth, twin halves of the same soul, they defeated each other. One cannot win a fight against the person in the mirror, only understand and accept them. Erza felt oddly at peace as she lay on the ground, the fragments of her shattered armour around her, knowing that she had been understood and accepted too.

When she bade the other Erza farewell, she wished with all her heart for her to find happiness. Find someone who would break through her walls and teach her to love again. Someone like Gray.

She realised epiphanically, as she was sucked into the anima that her fear earlier was not because she could not love him, but because she already did.

They returned to Earthland. A horde of Exceeds met their arrival and Gray wondered if he would ever get a moment to breathe. When the feline angels flew off, he found him and Erza turning to each other automatically, their fists pumping in the contagious gesture they had picked up from one of the Exceeds. For a moment, it looked as though she was going to say something but then the black cat appeared, with Lisanna in tow and they were thrust into chaos.

The happiness that bloomed in his chest at the sight of her familiar silver head was disconcerting. He had not even known her that well, but the sight of her laughing and hugging Natsu and Happy made a lump rise in his throat. Lisanna had been returned to them from the dead. It was a precious gift. He wondered if Erza felt even a tenth of this joy when she looked at Jellal. No wonder she could not let him go.

They took Lisanna to Kardia Cathedral to meet Mira and Elfman. Erza was so normal with him that it made him wonder if he really had almost stirred the hornet's nest and upended their lives. It made him think that maybe his moment with Erza, what little of it there was, had well and truly passed. It hurt like hell. The rain streamed down from dark clouds that were as heavy and oppressive as his future. The happy trio stood embracing before him.

At least he could pretend his tears were those of joy.

Erza saw the tears on the three Strauss siblings' faces and thought again of time and how easily it was lost.

They held a party in Lisanna's honour and

Gray was laughing and drinking with Cana. He looked so handsome in the black t-shirt and white coat that he always wore, the smile on his face warmer than a thousand suns. She wanted to speak to him, but the gaps in the conversation teased her as they flitted past. Even her Flight Armour would not have been quick enough to catch the 'right moment.' As she chatted with Lily, she finally understood Bisca's reluctance when it came to Alzack. She needed this to be perfect, for the moment to be 'right.' Telling him just then, without any preamble, was too abrupt.

A brawl started up, stoked by the embers of stupidity that never went out in the hearth of their guild. Gray was pulled into it as well, his coat flying off seconds before the joined the scuffle. Erza was startled when she noticed Juvia trying to strip off and join in too. Maybe abrupt was better than never, she reasoned as she waded into the fray. And if she accidentally managed to throw a couple of people at Juvia as she was breaking up the fight, then well, it was just that. An accident.

The kitchen was blissfully empty when she dragged Gray in. He had stopped resisting the moment he realised that, due to the kerfuffle, no one had noticed their exit. He watched her warily as she paced the spare few feet in between the kitchen counters.

"Gray," she said abruptly, coming to a halt in front of him. She could spend an eternity waiting for the right moment. She knew he had. She was Erza Scarlet, dammit. She would make her own moment. She wracked her brain for the careful words she had stayed up all night choosing. Right, they began, 'Gray,' and then… She would never tease Bisca again. This was torture.

Gray picked himself off of the floor from where she had unceremoniously dumped him and dusted off his trousers. He looked at her, puzzled, as though unsure of what she wanted or why she had brought him here. "Erza," he prompted, patience and curiosity mingling in his voice. His t-shirt pooled somewhere near his feet.

She ignored him and resumed her pacing. The incomprehension was radiating from him in waves. Then suddenly, there was a shift in the atmosphere, as though a penny had dropped into the still waters around them. She could feel it now. Tiredness, resignation, a hint of dread. "It's fine, Erza. Forget about it," he said. His voice had some finality in it. He retrieved his t-shirt and turned to go.

"I love you," she blurted. The words were spoken so quickly that she wondered if Gray thought he had imagined them. He turned to face her slowly. She could hear his heart thudding so loudly that she thought it was a miracle that he heard her next words at all. Under the turbulent emotions roiling in his eyes, she saw a spark of hope. She clung to it harder than he did.

"I want to treasure my time with you too. I do not want any regrets." She smiled at him and stepped close. She heard him take a deep juddery breath. "I love you," she said simply.

He gawped at her. The seconds ticked past. Ten, twenty, thirty… The silence yawned between them and Erza began to grow nervous.

"How can you say it so casually?" he demanded.

Of all the reactions she had anticipated to her confession, this had not been one of them. Had she really miscalculated that badly? Erza blinked in surprise and moved to take a step back. "I'm sorry, I-"

"No, wait!" He grabbed her wrist to stop her. "I'm sorry, that was- I was-" She could see the cogs turning in his brain as he fumbled for the right words. Giving up, he muttered, "Tch. I love you too." His blush-stained face was twisted off to the side.

A smile tugged at her lips and she feigned deafness. "I am sorry, what was that?"

He turned and looked at her then. The grip around her wrist loosened as he took her hand in both of his. "I love you too," he repeated. His voice was shaky, and his gaze was searching, as if looking for evidence of this being more than a dream. "No takebacks?" he whispered.

The doubt and hope in his voice broke her heart. She reached up to cup his face, the hint of stubble rough under her palms. "No takebacks," she promised and leaned in to kiss him.

Later, when she was standing wrapped in his arms, her nose buried in his neck, a naughty thought occurred to her. "You know, Gray," she said slyly, "are you sure you do not want any takebacks? Happy tells me that Edo-Gray was head over heels for Juvia."

He started, panicked, but then looked down at the smirk in her face. He laughed. It was a bright and confident sound and it filled her with more happiness than she had ever thought she would be allowed to feel. He leaned his forehead against hers and said assuredly, "Nope. He just hasn't met you yet."

In another world, Gray Surge was walking into Erza Knightwalker's office, unaware that his life was about to change forever.

Everyone expected them to do it.

Even they expected to take a route that will forever separate them from one another. They couldn't say anything to the other about it, they preferred to stay ignorant about their feelings because of these expectations.

She is to go with the man that she promised herself to save, no matter the cost, and he to someone that he had showed the sun. Everyone knew of the other people, but never about them. Oh, how much they wanted to tell everyone about their feelings about one another, but could not.

Everyone expected them to take a certain route and to not stray from that route. Every day; every night.

Fleeting glances to one another. Every time they managed to catch the other's eye, only adoration could only be seen. The adoration and appreciation they have for one another, but never able to act upon them.

Even with the pure fact that they could reject everyone's norm and give it a try, but they knew. They knew that even with as much the love they had for one another, it was not enough for them to survive a possible relationship. They had tried it, and they quickly parted ways before it destroyed them forever.

Even with what could be perceived as a failed rela-

tionship between the two of them, they still held a deep love for one another. They helped each other when the weight of the world fell onto their shoulders. They gave much-needed advice to maneuver the world without the other and so much more.

Erza knew she would lose Gray in some way or another when she told him that he needed to tell Juvia the truth about his feelings. She knew that there was something brewing between the two, and knew full well that Gray would not make a decision until he made peace with himself. That included her.

Even with their mutual feelings toward one another, it was expected for them to find their own sources of happiness.

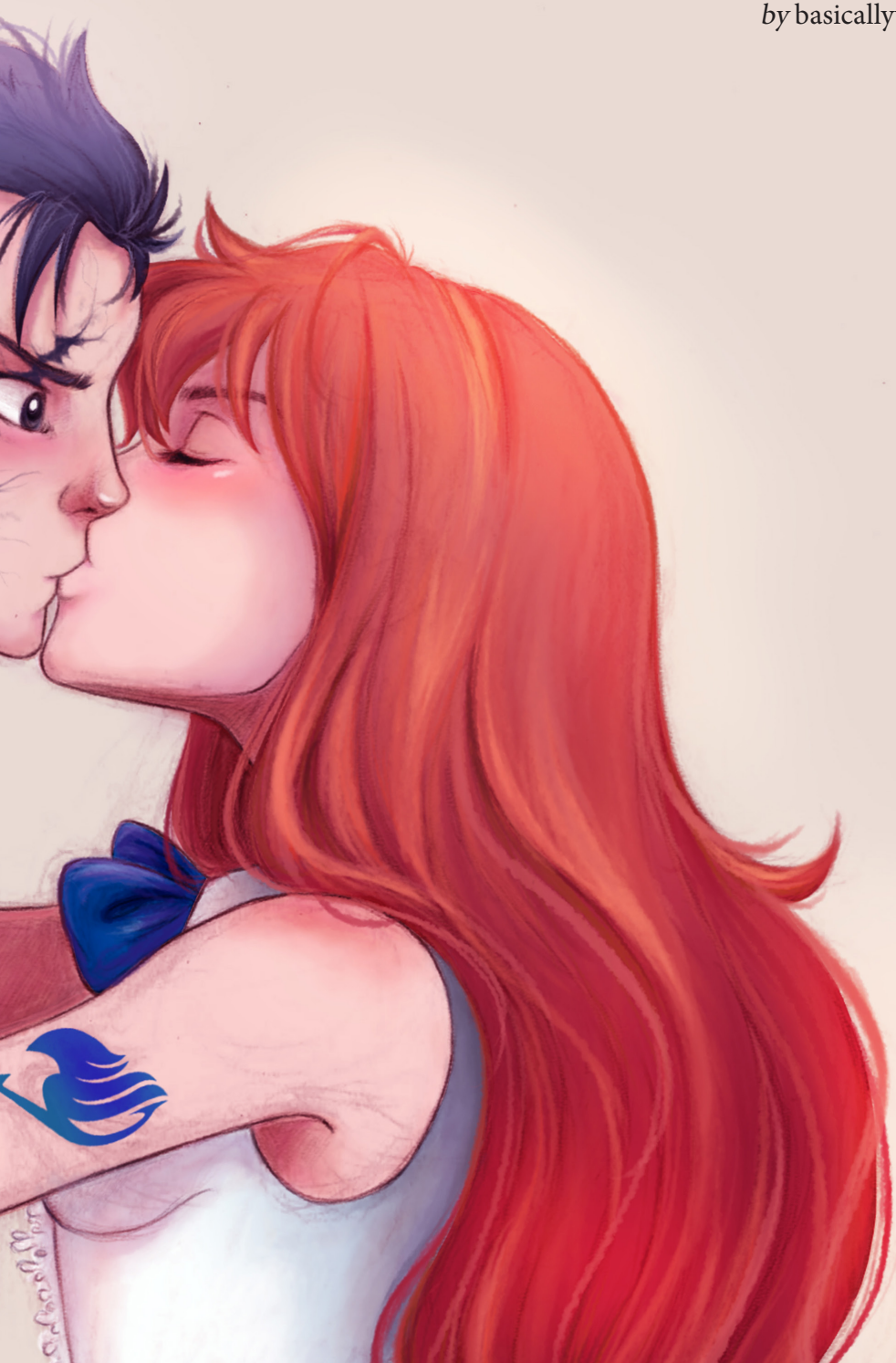
Gray looked through the crowd, looking for a familiar shade of red. He could see Ezra talking animatedly to a blushing Jellal about the wide variety of strawberry shortcake. The smile she had reached her eyes; complete adoration. It seemed that Ezra had found her happy ending.

As for himself? Gray found his own brand of happiness, just as Erza did for herself.

Expected Ending *by* Unsung-Knight

'19

by basicallyvalitutti



Good Luck, Gray

Gray leaned against the wall of the infirmary, huffing softly when he saw Erza clumsily trying to bandage her arm. "Need some help?"

Erza seemed surprised at his voice, head whipping around only for her fierce gaze to soften when it fell upon him. "Gray..."

A smile curled her lips at her friend's arrival.

The ice mage sat down on a stool in front of her and took over, grabbing the loose strip of white cloth from her and carefully unwrapped the mess of white cloth on her forearm. "That was one hell of a fight." Gray grabbed a new gauze pad and pressed it firmly into the cleaned flesh wound, one hand holding it steady while the other began wrapping the a roll of gauze around Erza's arm.

Erza's smile widened. "It was." She winced when Gray wrapped the bandage too tightly and the ice mage immediately loosened his hold, starting over again.

He winced in sympathy, fingers working to gently apply the bandage this time. "Sorry. I thought Porlyusica healed you?"

The knight shook her head. "She's busy treating Wendy and Lucy; I'm fine on my own."

Gray frowned, shaking his head. "Don't say that; you can barely bandage your arm yourself."

Erza snorted softly, hair falling into her face when her head lowered in thought. "I guess that's true..."

Gray cleared his throat, carefully making a knot to keep the bandage in place and smoothing it over Erza's arm, hand lingering on the spot. "Guess I'm up next against that fedora guy from Sabretooth." His gaze scanned the rest of her body for injuries, spying bandages peeking forth from the buttoned-up shirt she wore, most likely Porlyusica's work before she went to treat the others.

Erza watched him quietly before speaking. "Do you know how you can defeat him?"

The male shrugged. "Eh, I got a plan."

Erza rose eyebrow in disbelief. "Really? What plan?"

The dark-haired teen grinned. "If I tell you, I'll spoil the show."

by Scarlet RedFox

He winked playfully and Erza hummed in amusement, gaze spying the hand still resting gently on her arm.

Gray noticed the action, quickly taking his hand back and clearing his throat. Erza crossed her arms, trying not to think too deeply on the lingering touch that still left a trail of warmth in its wake. "Just be careful. He's not one to be underestimated with his magic."

Gray nodded seriously despite his earlier joke. Of course, he wouldn't underestimate him, at least not after the show Minerva pulled with Lucy.

"I know; I figured as much. I don't know how many tricks he has up his sleeve, but..." Gray recalled Erza's powerful display with her Blumenblatt in her pandemomium battle and smiled, slowly standing up.

"Hm? What is it?" the knight looked up, her brow arched in a silent question.

Gray inclined his head towards the door with a small apologetic smile. "Sorry, I gotta get ready for the fight."

Erza nodded in understanding. "Of course."

Gray stood in the doorway for a moment, head racing with thoughts. His hand curled into a fist on the wall, before he seemed to make up his mind to speak. "By the way..."

Erza looked up at his back, waiting patiently for an answer. "What is it?"

The genuine words leaving his lips made her heart oddly jump in her chest. "Your sword performance was amazing."

Erza's smile softened, cheeks flushing with colour. She blamed it on the warm temperature in the room. "Thank you. Good luck out there, Gray."

Gray smiled, his own cheeks a light pink. He blamed it on warmth in the room and certainly not at the warmth that encased his heart. "Keep watching, I'll show you how I'll win."

With that, he walked away, leaving a smiling Erza watch after his retreating back.

Just Like Yesterday

by Mnemosyne's Elegy

Erza was quite tired of feeling small. It wasn't a feeling she was used to, as she was not particularly short and was often regarded as a bit larger than life by even those taller than her. She had a warrior's bearing and confidence born of power, and it showed.

And then she had quite suddenly been turned into a *child*, a sorry state of affairs that she had not been forced to endure for many years, and been tossed about unceremoniously by Minerva. Also a sorry state of affairs, as she would have liked to defeat the other woman in a fair fight. Again. But then, she thought a little sadly, it seemed like Minerva was intent on defeating herself, dragging herself through the mud to skulk in the shadows with dark guilds.

And as if that indignity wasn't enough, Erza was now surrounded by a group of thawed and very lively giants. One had very nearly squashed her flat. It didn't matter that she was properly full-sized again — thank goodness! — when everyone else towered fifty feet in the air. She might be her normal self, but being confronted with toes almost at eye-level made her feel even smaller than when she'd been forcibly de-aged. She wondered if this was what the Master felt like on a daily basis.

It wouldn't have been so bad if her friends were similarly out of sorts, but they seemed perfectly content.

Flare, after a bout of awkwardness, had smiled the biggest smile Erza had ever seen and fallen back into place like she'd never left the Sun Village at all. Lucy and Wendy seemed more curious than uncomfortable, taking everything in with wide, starry eyes. Charle was berating Happy for his clumsiness during the mission — something about dropping the moon drip and not being able to fly in a straight line when reduced to a kitten, as well as something especially stupid he'd done that Erza couldn't quite make heads or tails of — while he looked contrite aside from the sidelong longing glances he cast at the huge spread of food laid out in the village center. As if he hadn't already stuffed himself silly the second it was brought out. Natsu, of course, was having the time of his life, eating everything he could get his hands on and chatting loudly to anyone who would listen. He was actually sitting on top of one of the giant's heads, for goodness' sake. And Gray…

Erza looked around with a small frown. Actually, she didn't see Gray anywhere. She knew he'd been here earlier when the party had begun, but she couldn't seem to find him now.

"Where's Gray?" she asked Lucy, sidling up next to her.

Lucy paused her storytelling — evidently she was practicing her skills as an up-and-coming authoress by regaling the giants with tales of the team's many adventures, although that was only after she'd gawped wide-eyed at their own raucous yarns — and glanced around the square. The large edifices and sprawling walkways were illuminated brightly in the blazing light of the eternal flame, but only a dozen giants and the humans sans Gray were visible. Still, there were plenty of places to hide or simply be overlooked in a village where everything was twenty times its normal size.

"Hm, I don't see him," she said. "He was here earlier. The giants were really interested in him and Natsu — since they melted the ice and relit the eternal flame, you know — so they were asking a lot of questions. I guess he might have wandered off. I'm sure he'll turn up sooner or later."

Erza shrugged it off. Lucy was right, and it wasn't her job to babysit her team. Gray was a big boy and could do what he wanted. Still, she caught herself keeping an eye out for him. He ought to be out here in the thick of things, celebrating with the rest of them. She was a little surprised that he wasn't picking a fight with Natsu or bragging to everyone with ears about how he'd defeated the de-aging demon and melted the ice smothering the eternal flame.

She drifted around the square, idly keeping a lookout for Gray while she pounded some sense into Natsu and thanked their hosts and winced at the deafening sounds of their revelry. She would have thought she'd be used to such noise and chaos since Fairy Tail had more than its fair share of it, but even such a rowdy guild as theirs couldn't quite compare to a gathering of partying giants. They came awful close, though.

She squawked in surprise as a giant shoe stomped down right next to her.

"Oh?" The giant leaned down and squinted myopically in her direction. "Sorry about that."

"Sit down, you short-sighted oaf!" another giant roared. "You're going to squish one of the little ones with how bad your eyes are!"

Erza shuddered. A near-sighted giant was a terrifying thought.

While the offender shuffled off meekly, Erza took the opportunity to slip between two of the houses. At least she was less liable to get squashed here.

She walked through the gap between the houses — a veritable alleyway of its own — and emerged on the other side. It was a little quieter here since the party was confined to the other side of the housing row, but not by much. It was a little darker too, but light and shadow still danced a merry tune as the eternal flame crackled merrily high above.

She wandered along the street, regarding the houses lining either side curiously. She eyed the oversized objects strewn about and craned her neck all the way back to run her gaze along the roofs. She felt like a doll who had escaped from her dollhouse. What a peculiar feeling. She had never really had dolls before — there had been no use for them in the Tower and she hadn't been enough of a child

after to display more than a passing interest in child's toys — but she imagined this would be what it felt like.

She was so absorbed in examining every detail of the village that she almost tripped right over Gray.

He was sitting with his back to one great wall and his face tilted up, lips pursed and eyes distant as his gaze wandered idly among the stars.

"Gray?" Erza asked. "What are you doing out here?"

He brought his chin back down and regarded her, dark eyes glittering solemnly in the firelight. "Not much," he said. "What about you?"

An odd feeling like tiny butterflies fluttering in Erza's stomach tickled her senses, but she squashed it down ruthlessly. It seemed to be popping up more frequently lately, which she found quite vexing. She hadn't put a name to it just yet, but it had definitely been making a nuisance of itself as of late.

"Oh, I almost got stepped on by a giant and decided it seemed a little less dangerous back here. But I thought you'd be thrilled with such a big party."

Gray wrinkled his nose and then caught himself and smoothed his features back out. "I suppose. It's fun, I just needed a break for a few minutes."

"Me too!" Erza agreed with feeling, and a faint smile tugged at the corner of Gray's mouth.

Really? The indefatigable Erza, strict disciplinarian of the craziest guild in Fiore, was undone by a handful of giants?"

"Oh, hush."

Erza sat down beside him with a huff and eyed him curiously. She wondered what he was thinking about, out here away from everyone. The muffled sounds of revelry ricocheted off the high, stony walls, and she was surprised at how distant they seemed when the party was just down the road.

Gray, after watching her expectantly for a moment more, tilted his head back again and returned his gaze to the sky. Erza followed suit. The walls of the surrounding houses towered high in the air before revealing a thick crack of velvet night and twinkling stars between the roofs, and not even the rough stone pressed against her back was enough to dispel the sudden vertigo. When even the sky seemed small and far away, how could she not feel tiny and insignificant? She took a few deep breaths until her head cleared.

Once her tunnel vision broadened back to something approaching normalcy, though, it didn't seem quite as stomach-churning. She still felt small and a little lost in a world that was much too big for her, but the sky was really the same as it had always been, now that she was looking. It was constant, and Gray was a grounding presence at her side. He was just as small as she in their surroundings, but he was the one thing here that matched her and made her feel a little more normal.

They sat in companionable silence for a while, with only the crackling of fire and muffled roar of merriment drifting their way. Erza wasn't quite sure what to say to him, and sometimes words just weren't necessary. So she did a little stargazing for a few minutes before breaking the spell the quiet had cast over them.

"What are you thinking?" she asked.

Gray hesitated a beat before saying, "Nothing, really. You know I don't do a lot of thinking. What about you?"

Erza pulled her gaze away from the star-spangled sky to eye him sidelong. That sounded rather evasive to her ears, but it wouldn't do much good to push at him and she was just as likely trying to make a big deal out of something small.

"Not much," she said, before changing her mind. There was no point trying to prod Gray into sharing unless she shared something first. He would never open up that way. "Just been feeling kind of small, you know? It's disconcerting to suddenly be the smallest thing in the room."

"Small…?" Gray looked over, eyes sharp with sudden interest, and Erza blinked back in surprise. "Yes, it's a weird feeling. And suddenly being a kid again was crazy, huh? Really… brought back memories."

"Did it?" Erza wondered aloud, puzzling over the careful way he was choosing his words.

"It didn't bring back memories for you?"

"Not really," she admitted, wondering if it should have. "I mean, I freaked out a little about suddenly looking like a child again. What a nightmare! My magic was shot, too. I was even smaller than Wendy! I could just imagine what Jellal…" She trailed off, overtaken by a quiet sort of loss as she thought about how her feelings for Jellal had changed over time and what was missing now. Gray cut a sharp look her way, and she shook off her melancholy before he could pounce on it. "And just imagining you and Natsu jumping on the chance to take me down gave me a headache!"

She had hoped to lighten the mood and maybe pull a smile out of him, but Gray merely looked away. "Yes, I can imagine it would be a pain."

Erza bit her lip. She had the feeling that she had given the wrong answer, failed some kind of test. Gray was quickly losing interest now, and she still couldn't determine the cause of his odd mood or if it was anything to be concerned about.

"Did…something happen? When you got de-aged and fought the demon?"

Gray's pause was so brief that Erza couldn't be entirely sure if it was there at all.

"No, not really," he said. "It was just strange, I guess. It was…just like being a kid again, for a second."

Erza considered that. Maybe it was stranger that she *hadn't* found the experience particularly nostalgic. Perhaps it would have made more sense to be reminded of her childhood when she saw her child's body reflected in the ice. But to her, it had been more like dragging her childhood body into the present rather than traveling back to the past. She had thought about how it might affect things now, and quickly become too caught up trying to survive Minerva's onslaught to worry about memories.

"Well, we aren't kids anymore," she said finally.

"Obviously," Gray said tersely, and Erza realized she had said the wrong thing again.

"Just… A lot of things happened back then, good and bad. And those things have helped shape who I am, but they don't define me. Things change. *We* change. I'm not the

same girl that escaped the Tower. I'm not still standing around on the sidelines watching the world pass me by and refusing to risk making friends. I'm not still jumping at shadows and waiting for the other shoe to drop. I'm not still waiting around for Jellal to…" She trailed off and took a deep breath, again feeling Gray's calculating gaze on her. "The point is, everything that happened to me as a child helped make me who I am today, but I haven't let them hold me back. I get to shape my own future. We aren't those children anymore, Gray. We've grown up since then."

Gray didn't say anything for a long time. He looked back up at the sky, and his fingers picked idly at the grass peeking from between the paving stones.

"Maybe you're right," he said finally.

Erza let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding. She didn't know if she'd said the *right* thing, per se, but at least she hadn't said the *wrong* one.

"I usually am."

Gray nodded to himself and, quite suddenly, leaned in just a little too close until they were practically nose to nose. His melancholy was overshadowed by a smirk, and his dark eyes glittered like the night sky alive with stars. Erza's breath caught in her throat and heat flooded her cheeks. She started to lean back and then stopped herself. Because she couldn't let him think she was intimidated, obviously.

"What, you've really finally given up on Jellal?" he teased.

His warm breath fluttered along her cheekbones like butterfly wings, but it was nothing compared to the butterflies awakening in the pit of Erza's stomach again. And honestly, it might just be the eternal flame blazing somewhere behind them, but it really was much too warm out here.

"W-well, kind of," she stuttered. She reasoned that Gray's already pale skin looked even more washed out in the firelight and dancing shadows, so maybe her flush wasn't really that noticeable.

"Hm…" Gray searched her face and Erza got the very distinct feeling that he was looking for something in her eyes or words or actions, but she didn't know what it was. And then he leaned back and frowned back up at the stars, and it hit her that she had failed the test again. "Yeah, it can be hard letting go," he said softly.

"Yes," she agreed with a sigh. "No one ever said it was easy. But eventually it lets us move on. We can't always be holding on to the past and wonder why our future looks so bleak." She hesitated and then said, with a sudden spurt of unwarranted and frankly dangerous boldness, "We're creating opportunities. Don't you think you should take the opportunity while you can?"

Gray started rather violently in surprise and turned wide, astonished eyes on her. Erza turned very, very red and wished she could snatch the impudent words back out of the air. Good grief, was she *flirting* with him?

"And do you think," Gray asked slowly, choosing his words with obvious care, "that we should seize *every* opportunity?"

He could be a gentleman when he wanted to be, offering her a way out again. He was studying her like a puzzle that needed solving again, looking for a sign.

Erza's heart thundered loudly in her chest, pounding against her ribcage in protest. Gray was a good man, really. He had his flaws, but who didn't? He was kind to her and brought swarms of butterflies alive in her stomach when he flashed her that crooked smile of his and sometimes she thought, when he looked at her like she was the only one in the room and he wanted to say something but wasn't quite sure how, that maybe he felt it too. But there was also Jellal and…

She took a deep breath and shook the thought right out of her head. It didn't do much good to give him advice if she didn't bother to consider it herself. Here was an opportunity, maybe one that had always been just around the corner but was now presented to them on a silver platter, and she had to decide if it was worth taking. It was like Gray had asked: was *every* opportunity worth seizing?

"I think," she said, her voice sounding oddly husky in her own ears, "that depends on us. Obviously we can't take every opportunity, but we should seize the ones we want the most. What do you want, Gray?"

He hesitated, steeling his nerve or making up his mind or still searching for the right answer in her face, and then said, "I very much want to kiss you."

Erza's heart leaped up into her throat, and her mouth was so dry that she had to swallow twice and clear her throat before forcing out a croak. "I think I do too."

And suddenly Gray was awkward and fumbling rather than cocky and mischievous, face dusted pink in the moonlight and hands twisting together uncertainly. After a moment longer of hesitation, he leaned in and pressed his lips against Erza's. It was quick and awkward and downright chaste, the product of a union between two teenagers with very little experience with things like love and kissing.

When they broke apart, they stared at each other uncertainly, faces aflame, and tried to figure out what came next. Erza wondered if they should practice some more. It hadn't been the passionate affair that the romance novel secreted under her mattress back home had led her to believe, but she found that she liked the feeling of Gray being so close. She was even starting to get used to the butterflies. They seemed a little less irksome when he was touching her.

Gray cleared his throat and ducked his head as he rubbed his fingers across the bridge of his nose. "What now?" he asked, sounding a little strangled.

"I don't know."

"But…what *are* we?"

"I don't know," she answered truthfully. "Whatever we want, I guess."

"Natsu and Happy would tease us mercilessly."

"Undoubtedly."

"Juvia would flip out."

"Of course."

"The guild would freak out."

"Definitely."

"Things might not work out."

"Maybe not."

"So…" He looked at her helplessly as if wishing she would give him the answers. "Is it enough?"

Erza found that the tables had turned and now she was the one trying to gauge his thoughts. "I guess that depends on if we think it's an opportunity worth seizing. What do *you* want?"

Gray was quiet for a long time before saying, "I think I want to kiss you again."

Erza smiled. "I think I want that too."

And he did. He pressed close and kissed her once, twice. They were still unsure of themselves, young and inexperienced, but he made her feel big and bright and beautiful, no longer small and insignificant when they were the only ones in the world.

And then he kissed her harder, faster, with a desperation that left her breathless. She made a small sound of surprise. It didn't feel *bad*, just unexpected. There was something a little off about it, like he was starving and frantic…or like he was desperate to distract himself from something else entirely.

When he stopped and buried his face in the crook of her neck, his breath shuddered against her skin like a suppressed sob.

"Make me forget," he whispered.

The elation and wonder crashed down all at once. Erza had been right: something had happened, something that he wasn't ready to tell her yet but hopefully would someday. Or maybe the de-aging really had just made him nostalgic like he'd said. But something was obviously bothering him still, and maybe she had been selfish to forget about it.

She wrapped her arms around him tight and buried her nose in his hair. "I'm sorry," she said quietly, her voice laced with regret. "I can't do that. Our past is always going to be part of us…but that doesn't mean it should close off our future or spoil what we have right now."

Gray's voice wavered as he said, "Then give me something better to remember."

Erza released him to take his face in her hands. His eyes shimmered with unshed tears, and firelight sparked like stars in liquid dark eyes. She thought of when he'd found her at the riverbank all those years ago and slowly set about befriending her — proof that the past wasn't all bad and sometimes it wasn't such a terrible thing to look back on yesterday. She thought of the way he made the butterflies dance and looked at her like she was the only woman in the world until it didn't matter how small she looked to anyone else.

She wanted to give him something back. She wanted to practice kissing him until they learned how to fit together like puzzle pieces. To hold his hand and laugh with him while the guild gaped in disbelief. To be there when the shadows of the past came hunting them, and to live every moment to the fullest at his side.

She wanted to show him that it was okay if they weren't quite sure what would happen next. She wanted to show him the future she dreamed of in her mind's eye and hold on tight to the opportunity they'd been given. She wanted to drag him out of yesterday and show him tomorrow. *Their* tomorrow.

"That," she said, "I can do."

by Cloctor Creations

A Foolish Heart

by gaymirajane

Two months trickled passed, the four after that a torment. Gray did not know what he missed more, his guild or his teammates. He looked at Juvia, watched her make dinner whilst singing softly under her breath, and Gray knew then that this was not the life he wanted.

He loved Juvia, of course, but in the same way he loved Lucy, or even Laxus. There was no way to explain it to her that she could understand; he had tried multiple times, but was met with nothing but confusion and denial. The only person who truly understood him was Erza.

There was something about the redhead, unmistakable and irreplaceable, and Gray missed her more than he could explain; more than he missed anyone else. How typical it was, that he only realised how dear Erza was too him when he could no longer see her, touch her, or feel her reassuring presence.

They had shared one kiss before the battle of Alverez, adrenaline fuelled and messy, with Gray's only regret being that he could not find a more romantic setting for Erza. One that he knew she fantasised about whilst reading Lucy's novels.

His communicator beeped, and he checked it slowly. Lyon messaged him every now and then, just to make sure that everything was okay, and other than that Gray had no real contacts.

Meet me at the outskirts of Hargeon at 7. I need to see you. E.

Gray's mind raced, his legs almost giving way underneath him. The only other people he knew with the first initial 'E' were not close enough to him to start a conversation like this. Elfman was a friend, but Erza… she was special. Was it futile to hope that the message was from her? He thought not.

Time moved even slower than he thought possible, each second an agony which Gray did not know how to face. If the person was not Erza, then he would be crushed. Every fibre of his being yearned for the redhead, his memories of her edging into fantasies, even after only

six months apart. Gray adjusted his slacks, glad that Juvia was not around to paw at his obvious excitement.

He took some deep breaths, let ice chill his body until he felt calmer, more reasonable. Even if it was Erza - and he hoped that it was - there was no guarantee that she would reciprocate his feelings, even if she had kissed him before. People did impulsive things whilst under the right amount of pressure; he did not want to assume how Erza felt. Still, that did not stop Gray from having a long shower, shaving the stubble from his face and styling his hair.

"Gray-sama looks beautiful!" Juvia sighed, and he took that as a reassurance that his appearance was passable, at least. Gray had been focused on training over these passed few months, so he was confident enough in his body. It was just his face that he was concerned about, having never been voted one of *Sorcerer Weekly*'s most desirable men… unlike Loke, Hibiki, and Jellal. Or Siegrain. Gray still did not fully understand what had happened there, between the ex-council member and Erza's childhood friend, and frankly he was now too scared to ask.

Stepping back into the clothes he had just absent-mindedly stripped from, Gray shook himself, knowing that comparing his appearance to other men would not ease his nerves. Instead, he focused on what he knew about Erza, and all the memories they had shared together. It should have been obvious, really; he loved her. He had loved her as a child, when she was stoic and cold and cried on her own, and he loved her as an adult, with her playful antics and warm heart. Maybe Gray had always known, but had never truly associated the feeling of ecstasy every time he saw her smile with something heavier and more intimate that friendship. Or maybe he just did not want to admit it, afraid of the riptide of change it would send splashing throughout their team.

Something else became glaringly obvious to him then; Gray was a fool. An idiot of the highest order. He had let Erza leave, had watched her go without so much as a goodbye. In that moment, determination set in; he would not make the same mistake again. Even if it was purely platonic, Gray could not be without Erza for this amount of time. He had experienced that pain already, so now he would find a reason to keep them together, no matter what it cost.

"Is Gray-sama going out this evening?" Juvia asked, collecting the plates and scraping the leftovers into the bin.

"Yeah, I'm meeting a friend."

"A friend? Juvia will come too!" She was excited, as she always was, at the prospect of spending time with him, but it was bad enough that they were living together. Gray needed this, a moment to himself and - hopefully - a moment with Erza.

"No." He snapped. "I want to see them on my own. You should stay here." Gray did not want to be rude to Juvia. He valued her friendship very much, and would do almost anything to make her happy. But she wanted more than he could give her, and if hurting her was the only way to make her understand that he was not the perfect prince that she expected him to be, then it would have to suffice.

He did not want to see the wounded expression on Juvia's face, so Gray closed his eyes, breathing heavily through his nose.

"I don't know what time I'll be back, so don't wait up."

Gray turned away from her, smoothing out the creases from his shirt and wiping invisible dirt from his trousers.

"Have fun, Gray-sama." Juvia's voice was still sweet, and fond. Gray did not know if that made him feel better or worse.

He stepped outside, glad that it was cold already at this early part of the evening, and began to walk to Hargeon. It was just over an hour away to walk, not too far but far enough for him to clear his thoughts, and Gray was more than a little grateful for that.

Although it was barely five in the evening when he left, the nights were getting longer, and the sunset threatened overhead. The sky was a soft blue, marred only by ripples of the most dangerous shade of scarlet Gray had seen. He thought that they were stunning, and his beat a little faster at the prospect of seeing Erza, a woman so beautiful that she rivalled nature itself. That thought was followed by a familiar, sinking feeling. She was too good for him. Gray barely swallowed down the bile which rose in his throat.

Anxiety was an excellent driver, Gray had found. He arrived at his destination earlier than anticipated, resting on the sign post which marked Hargeon to travellers. It was difficult not to constantly check his communicator, or his watch, but Gray almost managed, focusing on his breathing and keeping calm instead. That was an uneasy task in of itself. Why was he so nervous? He had seen Erza almost every day of his life for more than ten years, and in that time they had only changed for the better. That was also assuming that it was Erza, of course. If it wasn't, Gray did not know if he would be able to hide his disappointment.

There was no telling how long Gray had waited for, but it was long enough for the colours in the sky to mingle into a royal shade of purple, and he was just about to give up all of his hopes when a voice broke the silence, strong and clear, coming from behind him.

"I was unsure if you would come."

Relief spread through him like a wildfire, warm and consuming; that was a voice he knew well, the one that he had been longing to hear. Gray swivelled on his heels, trying not to seem desperate to see the woman and failing.

"As if I could resist." He grinned.

Seeing Erza had put him instantly at ease. Her hair was longer, and she was shorter than Gray's memories had allowed her to be, but in large she was the same. Beautiful; intimidating. The woman that he loved.

"It's good to see you." Erza's voice was lower, more earnest, and she took a step towards Gray. Their eyes met, both searching and yet Gray did not know what for. Whatever it was, Erza found it first. In three strides she was pressed against Gray's body, skin cold but lips warm as they worked against his.

Gray's hand was in her hair, and Erza's arm circled his waist. Their pace was quick, and urgent, neither one wanting to let go for long enough to let the other breathe. They had done enough waiting; now all that Gray wanted was to fill his every sense with the redhead, if she would allow him to do so.

Erza stroked her hand along Gray's arm, lacing her fingers with his own and dragging him off, lips barely separating as she guided him backwards into the forest.

Her skin was bare, with no armour to be

seen, and it was almost too overwhelming for Gray, knowing that Erza trusted him enough to be completely vulnerable; completely herself. With or without her armour, she was breathtaking, and Gray felt lucky that she would want to be with him like this, out in the open air.

The sky was almost completely dark now, Erza's scarlet hair standing out in an ethereal contrast to the natural greens and yellows of the forest around them. Gray almost tripped over his feet trying to keep up with her frantic pace, and it seemed appropriate that he would be dragged by Erza, because in many ways he had been following her his entire life, just trying to keep her happy, and safe. Just wanting a chance to be noticed. And this was it, he thought, when she pushed him against a tree and claimed his mouth once more. This was his moment to show Erza just how much she truly meant to him.

Her tongue was fierce and demanding, her hands stroking every part of him that she could reach. Her mouth tasted like peppermint, only sweeter, and although they were chapped there was a softness to her lips which pleased Gray. The juxtaposition suited Erza, who herself was a mixture of hard and soft.

Having Erza against him was surreal, the pressure of her breasts rubbing against his chest, the drag of her nails over his stubbled jaw; it was all too much, and Gray was shuddering under the intensity of it all.

"You certainly seem pleased to see me." Erza trailed a finger over his growing erection, and Gray did not bother to wonder when he had stripped down to his boxers, was simply glad that his subconscious had kept them on. For years he had been teased by the guild, being called a perverted exhibitionist. Gray saw no need to prove them right.

With no warning or hesitation, Erza dropped to her knees. Through his straining boxers, Erza closed her lips around the tip of his cock, suckling on the head until Gray was swearing, panting, tilting his head back to face the sky and pray that he would have the strength to make it through the night. Erza rubbed her cheek against the warmth coming from under the fabric, licked her lips and met Gray's gaze. There was a hunger there which he had never seen before, especially as he knew how awkward Erza could be when it came to relationships and sex. She really had grown over the past year. Gray would be proud, if he was not in danger of cumming in his pants like a startled teenager.

"I want you, Gray."

The words tipped from Erza's mouth, dribbled from her tongue as she pulled down Gray's boxers and lavished in the sight of his cock springing free. He needed to hear those words, needed to know that Erza had missed him as deeply as he had craved seeing her, something she proved when she sprang on his erection, sucking the length and stroking his sack, encompassing every sense which Gray could focus on. He smelled her shampoo, tasted her lips on his tongue, and felt her heat and her need as she swallowed as much of him down as her throat would allow, forcing it until she gagged and then rolling her tongue around the shaft.

"Erza, I can't-" Gray gritted out, trying to keep in his mind where they were and what they were doing. As if he could ever forget the latter.

The temptation to spill his seed into Erza's throat, of course, but cumming so soon would be an embarrassment, and Gray wanted to focus on her pleasure as well.

"Come here." Erza murmured, giving one last lick to Gray's leaking slit before she stood, wiped her mouth with one hand and used the other to drag Gray further into the forest.

She had leaves attached to her skirt and tights, Gray's pre-cum on her lips, and if it were not for the cool night breeze Gray would have struggled to keep his composure. The great Titania, on her knees for the likes of him? He had never even dared to imagine such a thing would be possible.

The forest opened up into a small clearing, and a purple throw had been spread out under the stars, surrounded with food and fire… and Erza's armour. Gray tried to catch his breath, to process everything which was happening, but Erza was already stripping from her clothes, tying her hair up in a loose and messy bun.

She slid the tights down over her ankles, shucked off the skirt, and unbuttoned her blouse. He came up behind her, arms slotting perfectly around her waist, and Erza paused, turned her head so that it rested on Gray's shoulder and pressed a kiss against his jaw.

"You're so beautiful, Erza."

Gray trailed a fingertip along the curve of her breast, followed the expanse of her muscles and traced every scar. Her body was toned, as well-trained as the rest of Erza, and he loved her. He loved her so much he could barely stand it, fingers pressing roughly into Erza's waist until the woman gasped, mouth sucking on Gray's neck.

She shivered against him, the breeze a reminder of how exposed they were, and Gray pulled her closer, dipping his hand into Erza's underwear. The bra was a hot pink, the pants a demure white, and Gray loved both colours on her. But he loved the natural hue of her skin more, and how it blushed a deep crimson under his touch. Gray felt a strip of coarse hair, and then heat, soft and wet, and he spread that slickness around, spurred by the way that Erza's breath hitched, his name trembling on her lips.

"Good?" He asked, hoping for instructions on how he could make Erza feel better, but she simply hummed in response, mouth caught under sharp teeth, eyes screwed shut. She ran her hand up and down his arms, spreading her legs to give him better access, and Gray appreciated that shift. He found the hooded bundle of nerves and drew circles on it, experimenting with pressure until he found what Erza reacted to the most and kept that up, kissing the back of her neck in time with the movement of his fingers.

Erza was becoming more vocal, her mouth falling open as moan after moan penetrated the serene evening air. Her hips girated against his hand, demanding friction which Gray was more than happy to provide. As her knees began to give way, thighs quivering with the intensity of the pleasure rolling through her, Erza abruptly pulled away, spinning to face Gray with eyes which were dark with lust, pupils blown wide.

"I want you to fuck me, Gray."

If Gray was one thing, it was a man who did not need to be asked twice.

When Erza went to stand over the blanket, Gray followed, chest heaving when Erza pressed the palm of her hand over his racing heart and pushed until he sat on the ground, waiting to be shown what Erza wanted next. Before she joined him, Erza hooked both thumbs under the elastic of her underwear, shimmying them down her thighs slowly,

provocatively, exposing the most intimate part of herself inch by painful inch, until she slipped the fabric under her feet and threw them behind her to collect later. Gray gulped, not given a chance to admire Erza's physique before she straddled him, rolling her hips against his length and kissing him once more.

This kiss was different, deeper, and when she began to lean forward Gray let her, reclining until he was completely flat on the ground with the redhead on top of him.

Before she lowered herself, Erza unclasped her bra, breasts spilling free, nipples hardened to brown nubs with the mixture of the night air and the pleasure rippling through her. Her pale skin and flaming red hair stood out as a beautiful contrast against the bright moonlight, and Gray's eyes widened at the sheer exquisite beauty of her. He felt like a mortal man, faced with the intense grace of an ancient God, and that just made him want to treat her with more care and passion than he had already planned.

"You're breathtaking." He mumbled, reaching up to cup her cheek, and she smiled at him, lips pressing gently against the sensitive part of his wrist. And then she was moving, feet tucked tightly against Gray's sides, hands steadying herself on his chest as her hips sank lower. Gray moved his grip to the plump flesh of her rump, spreading the cheeks apart and raising a teasing brow when Erza hissed in response.

Tentatively, Gray pressed the tip of one finger against her hole, smirking when the redhead moaned, legs shaking as she impaled herself slowly on his shaft. Erza took him in willingly, her body relaxed and slack and pliable, accepting every inch gracefully, as though he was all she ever needed. Gray hoped that that was true. The heat of her was intense, the wetness pooling against his crotch, and when Erza began to bounce, satin insides dragging deliciously over Gray's cock, he tipped his head back and cursed, meeting her movements with small rolls of his hips, and two fingers spreading and exploring Erza's ass with excitement. He could never have guessed that she would be interested in anal of any capacity, but the way she reacted to his actions made his cock twitch. Sometimes she was lewd, sometimes adorable, and sometimes Erza was filthy, saliva pooling on her chin as she fucked herself on his cock with ardent delight.

"God, Gray, so good." Erza whined, breasts slapping sordidly against her chest. "So fucking good."

Hearing her curse was almost enough to force Gray undone, but he held on, thrust his hips up inside her until she was clawing at his chest, desperate for something neither of them could describe. He pulled his hand away from her backside, took a firm hold of her hips and sat up, so that their chests were flush, faces only a breath apart. Erza did not kiss him. Instead, she wrapped one arm around his neck, holding him close but not giving Gray what he desired.

Their thrusts were no more than frantic rolls of their hips now, with no real timing or coordination, breath mingling as their lips touched briefly, brushing only when Erza flicked a fallen strand of hair from her face. This was more intimate somehow, staring into one another's eyes as Gray was buried to the hilt within her. He wished that he could keep this moment forever, store it away so then if they were ever apart again he could remember what it felt like to have her completely, without any hesitation or regret or anything else which may try and force them apart.

"Feels so good." Erza was lost in herself, and Gray was shocked at how vocal she was. It was sinful, the noises which were being ripped from her throat, and Gray was mesmerised by them, satisfied that he could invoke such a reaction from the woman, only ever wanting to please Erza.

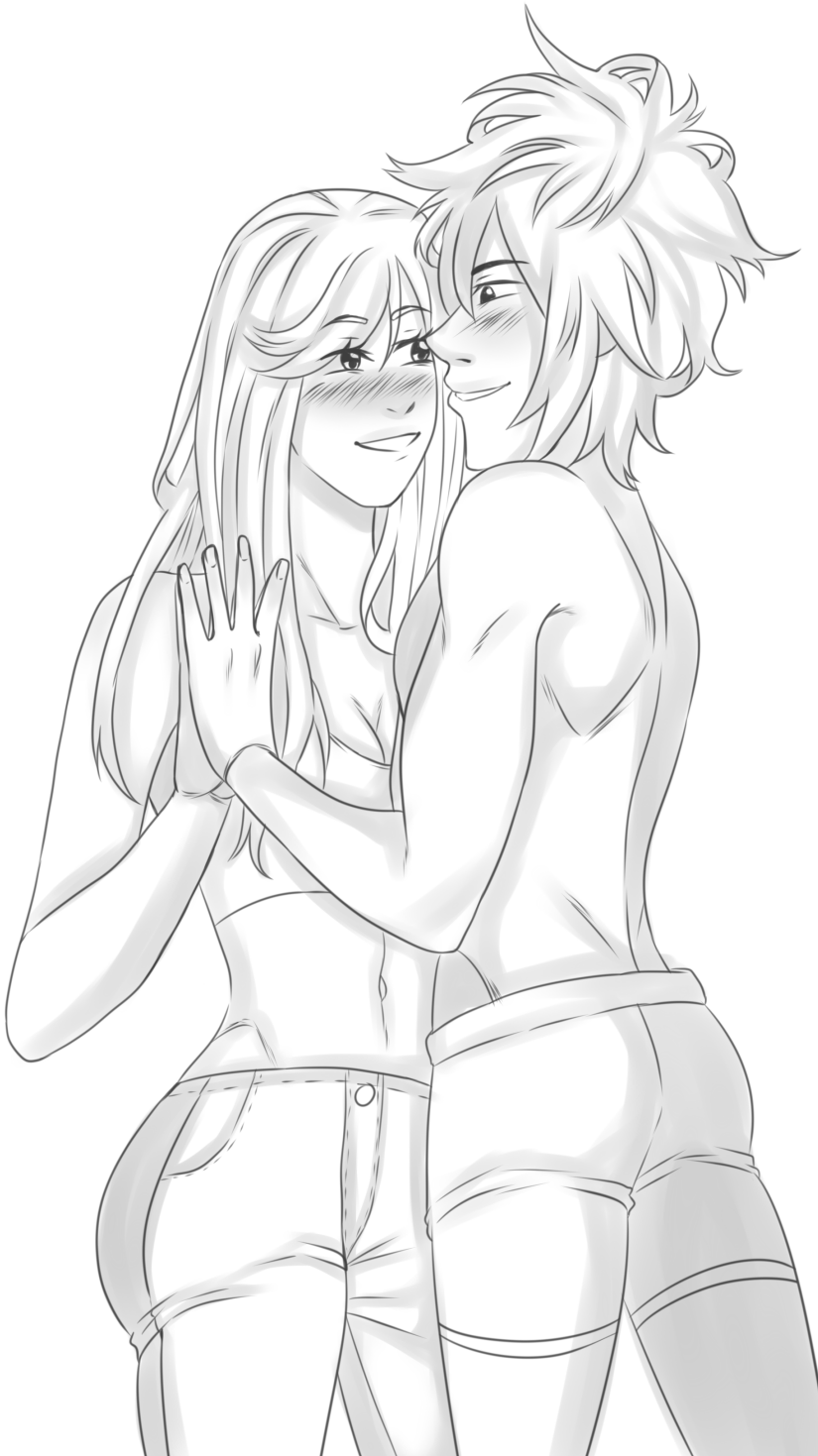
Her hands were rough, trying to grab onto Gray whilst rubbing circles on her own clit. He batted her hand away, taking over the action until Erza's mouth opened in a silent scream, her face dropping to bury into his shoulder as she writhed, back arching and legs spasming. On the second wave of her orgasm, Erza sank her teeth into Gray's neck, and the pain of the bite coupled dangerously with how tight she was constricting around his erection. He shuddered, vision going white as the weight of Erza eased him through his own orgasm. It was the most intense of Gray's life, with the ringing in his ears remaining long after Erza had dismounted, retrieving another blanket and throwing it over them.

Erza found the space against Gray's chest where her body fit perfectly and nestled into it, sighing in content.

"I missed you, Gray."

And then she was asleep, soft snores filling the silence and Gray could not help but smile. It did not matter if this was a one-time thing, because he knew that his heart would always race at the thought of her, and that her touch was branded onto his skin, a mark which could never be erased. If that made him a fool then Gray would accept the title with joy; he would rather be a fool in love than to be without the redhead for another moment.

All he could do now was hope that Erza felt the same.



by Sou

ellayuki
.tumblr.com
This is Code Blue.

Violet Interlude

writing and edits *by* EllaYuki

A few months after Fairy Tail disbands, Gray runs into Erza and there's not even a question as to whether he's going to help her track down Avatar.

They meet again, just a handful of months after the guild has disbanded, and for Gray, something clicks, something unwinds in his chest when he catches sight of her.

(He recognizes the flash of red he glimpsed in the crowd instantly. His heartbeat speeds up a few notches, breath hitching, and he makes a beeline before he even makes the conscious decision, forgetting all about the trip to the market he was in town for.)

Erza looks… the same, but somehow more… he doesn't know, more radiant maybe? When he finally catches up to her, it hits him like a brick how much he's missed her these past few months. He's missed everyone, but he admits, her the most.

"Erza! Hey!" He raises his hand, waves as he calls out to her over the noise of the children playing in the street and the townspeople going about their day. His heart skips when she turns her head, puzzled frown melting into a smile when she sees him.

"Gray!" she greets, and pulls him in for a bone-crushing hug (it feels like home in a way that living with Juvia hasn't managed to, though that, he will never admit to).

(The fact that the way the sun falls on her red hair reminds him of a particular moment in their childhood is entirely besides the point, he thinks. There are too many things that are different now.)

They catch up, sitting on the edge of a fountain in the town square, and it doesn't even feel like they've been apart for more than a week. Gray wonders at that, at how easy this is and always has been.

They chat about how they've been, what they know about their friends, laugh until it's hard to breathe and oh, Gray remembers what this feeling in his chest is. Even more so when Erza pushes a few locks of scarlet hair behind her ear as the wind tries relentlessly to blow it in her face and looks at him with a big grin and twinkling eyes.

(He'd wondered once if this feeling would ever go away. Apparently the answer is no, no, it will not.)

(And yes, he'd still tear the world apart for her if it meant she'd never have to cry again, if she'll always smile like she does now.)

It's offhand that it comes up, the fact that she's working with Jellal and Crime Sorcière to find dark guilds, and that the one they're searching for at the moment is the Zeref-worshiping Avatar. He's not exactly proud of the way he sees red at the mere mention of Zeref, but from the look on Erza's face, he knows she understands. Erza always understands.

"Do you want to help?" she asks him, though he's sure she already knows the answer. It's really not even something he has to think about before he says a resolute "Yes."

The plan is simple.

Well. It is in theory, at least, if not in practice, he thinks.

Pretend to have turned evil, infiltrate an evil cult, gather information, pass it on to Erza who passes it on to others (and he does not want to think about Jellal if he doesn't have to. He doesn't hate the guy, he just… well… he won't say he's jealous, but), and then they make plans as to how better dismantle said evil cult and bring its members to justice.

Simple.

Technically.

"Code Blue?" he asks, eyebrow raise in amusement. "Really?"

Erza pouts, just a bit. (Gray doesn't find it completely adorable. He absolutely does not.)

"Shut up," she says, shoving lightly (for Erza) at his shoulder. "It's a good codename, it suits you."

He snorts, tugs on a lock of hair. "Just like Code Red suits you, eh, Miss Scarlet? I mean… isn't that a tiny bit, I don't know, obvious?"

Erza shrugs. "It's only for emergencies, stop worrying."

"I have you for backup," he says, earnestly. His gaze doesn't waver, not like it might have done once. He's a little bit proud of himself for that. "I don't have to worry about a thing."

Erza smiles, that one particular smile, and well, Gray's been gone on her for years now. It's hardly anything new, the way his heart rate kicks up a notch.

Infiltrating a dark cult isn't exactly easy (surprise, surprise), but Gray manages it somehow. Hiding the disgust he feels for his so-called peers is harder than convincing them of his allegiance for some reason.

Finding a moment alone to call Erza and report in, though, is more difficult, because even though Avatar has accepted him, they're still a suspicious bunch and tend to keep an eye on each other.

The hardest thing, some days, is to come up with plausible excuses to not hang up when he's done reporting, to just… keep talking a little bit more. He tells himself it's because he's surrounded all day by bad guys and lunatics, and hearing a friend's voice helps keep him sane.

(He knows it will never be just that when it comes to Erza Scarlet, and yet, it's what he tells himself.)

"Anything new?"

"Nah. They're biding their time or something. It's annoying. There are days when I just feel like punching 'em all in the face and be done with it already."

"…that sounded like something Natsu would say."

"Hey! I do not sound anything like that flame-brain —"

"That aside, I was wondering if you can get away from them for a bit."

"Huh? I guess…? Why? Something happen?"

"Hm? No. No, it's just, I was thinking it would be easier for you to give us a clearer picture in person."

"You're right, yeah. I'll try to come up with something to tell them so they'll get off my back for a couple of days. I'll text you when I leave so you can tell me where we can meet up."

"Ok, see you soon, then."

"…yeah… yeah, see you soon."

Five months in and he's kept the reports to a minimum, has kept the actual meet-ups to zero after the one where things almost went sideways for their entire plan, and god, Gray wishes he could just go home, back to Magnolia, back to his old life.

(Back to seeing Erza on an almost daily basis and being able to breathe easy.)

Last time they talked, Erza had been adamant he does nothing to jeopardize his position in Avatar. Gray had wanted to argue the point.

"Not yet," she'd said, "Gray, not yet. And besides, it's not safe for you to just up and leave right now, if what you said about some of their suspicions is true."

"Maybe, yeah, but-"

"But nothing." Her voice is strong, decisive, but he can hear the edge of something, a crack maybe, he's not sure. (He won't hope.) "I got you into this, I'll figure out a way to get you out without raising too many red flags if you really want out. But you're not allowed to get yourself killed, do you hear me? I can't —" She takes a deep breath.

"Erza…" He doesn't know what to say to that. (His heart is thundering in his chest, though.) "Okay, I get it. Don't worry, I'll stay put. I'm not done with the bastards yet anyway."

He can almost see her nod. She sighs.

"Okay."

As always, everything comes to a head and goes completely to shit because of Natsu fucking Dragneel.

Because that is Gray's life, apparently.

He and Lucy come barging in and get themselves caught and really, as much as Gray would like to let the bastard get tortured (he'd deserve it, honestly), he's not willing to let Lucy get killed. Not on his watch, cover blown be damned.

He sighs after he freezes Gomon and pulls out the communication lacrima.

He dials Code Red.

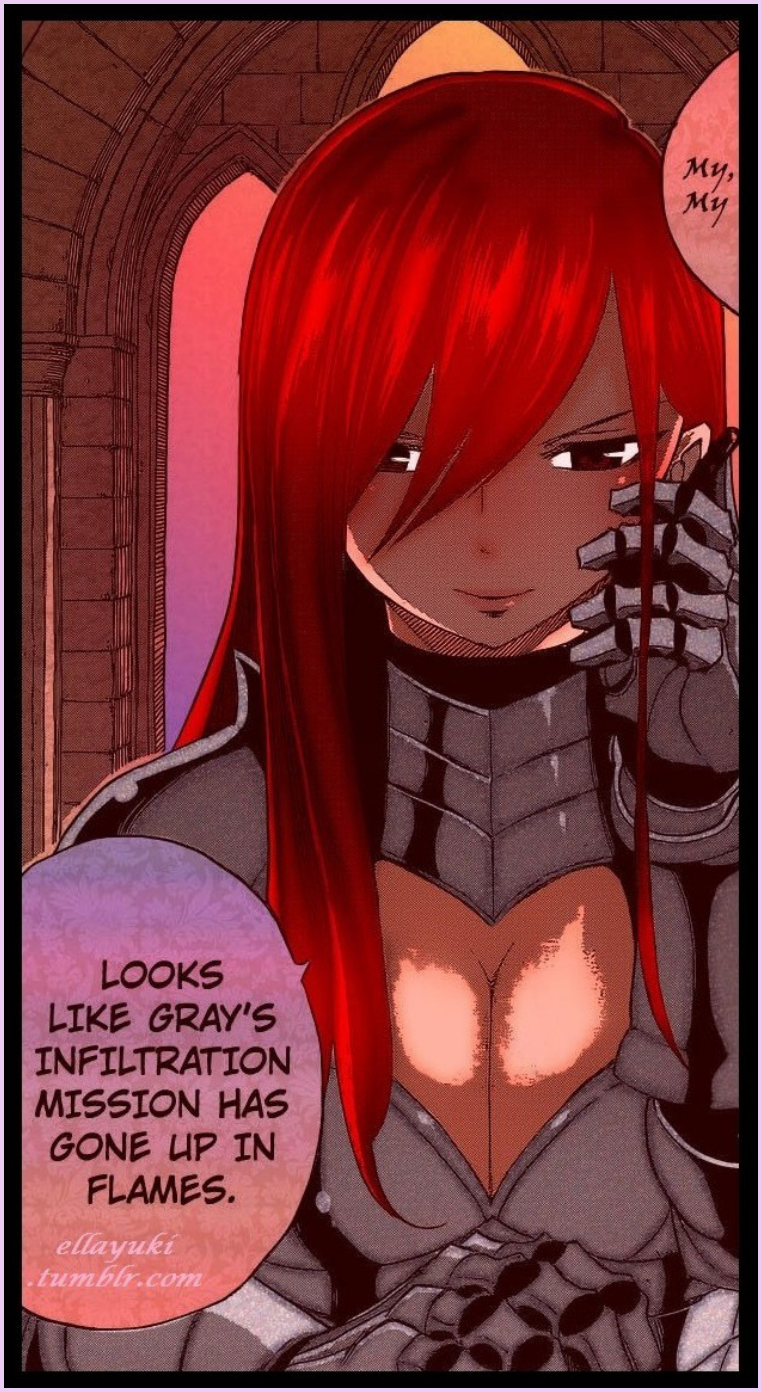
(Hopes Erza won't strangle them all for this.)

"This is Code Blue," he says when he hears the click on the other end. "We've got trouble."

(And he's immediately warmed by the immediate worry in her voice, the way she sounds like she's ready to come tear down walls and skewer everybody in sight if he needs it. He's warmed and kind of giddy despite himself, despite the situation, despite everything.

But well, he needs to get a damn grip and concentrate right now.

He's already plotting their way out as he lets Natsu speak with Erza. He'll see her soon enough anyway.)


My, My
LOOKS LIKE GRAY'S INFILTRATION MISSION HAS GONE UP IN FLAMES.
ellayuki
.tumblr.com

Impetus

by Magerain

It was the night before what could be the biggest war of their lives, but first, Gray had a bone or two to pick with Titania.

For the first time in a long time, Gray walked with purpose. They were headed into a war soon — an actual international war — with no certainty of everyone coming out alive. That simple fact was powerful enough to fuel courage he didn't know he had.

Oh, and it didn't help that he was pissed.

He was the first to reach the canal — figures he'd ask her to meet there. He brushed aside memories that came, unbidden, of the first time he had really, truly, seen Erza. Vulnerable, lost but still trusting.

'My lucky day, was it Cana?'

No, he couldn't distract himself. He had a bone to pick and pick it he shall.

"Good evening Gray," he heard, prompting him to turn around. Erza stood, clad in her usually "casual" armour, with confidence only she could carry.

"Erza," he acknowledged, his curt tone enough to bring a frown to her face.

Taking a few steps closer to him, she asked, "Is something the matter?"

Gray took a deep breath and turned around and sat heavily, facing the canal. A part of him suddenly hoped that didn't come across as a petulant child throwing a tantrum.

Erza took the cue to sit next to him, immediately calling off her armour.

The fact that she did caused warmth to bloom in his heart. Still —

"It's cold and dark. You should have the armour on."

"I'll requip a cardigan, should I need to. Thank you," she replied, matter-of-factly. "So, what was it that you needed to discuss at nine o'clock at night?"

"Something Juvia said," he said, eyes still fixed on the water ahead of them.

He didn't notice Erza stiffen.

"And what was it that she —"

"She said she owed you one, for helping her make a gift for me." His voice was calm, but with a clear edge. He looked at Erza from the corner of his eye, watching her face turn to one of confusion. With a hint of guilt.

"W-Well, she wasn't sure and I knew you'd —"

He didn't want to hear it.

"Earlier. You kept pushing Natsu away so Lucy and I could have "alone time". You weren't even subtle." His voice was growing louder.

"Yes, well, you two seemed to b-be getting along really well and — "

Gray turned around, not bothering to keep quiet anymore. "I can do that on my own! Why the hell would you care? Why do you feel the need to interfere in my love life?"

Erza's frown grew more pronounced. More angry. "Why would I care? I have yet to see you object to the rendezvous Mirajane keeps setting up for you!"

"That's different!"

"How?" She leaned closer to him, venom lacing her every word, "Why does she not merit such a yelling from you and I do? What is so wrong about me wanting to see you happy?"

"Because it's you! I don't want you, of all people, setting me up with other women, Erza!"

He didn't mean to sound so exasperated. So desperate. Gray turned away from Erza's stunned face to look at the ground.

Gray rubbed his eyes before the moisture building up could betray him. His shoulders slumped. "Not you. You have to know how I feel about you."

It was silent between them for several moments. Minutes. Hours? Gray couldn't tell. He couldn't even bring himself to look at her.

"Ugh, this wasn't how it was supposed to go down."

After several more excruciating moments, she spoke up. Quietly. "How was it supposed to then?"

Gray risked a peek at her. She had turned towards him, her eyes honest and open and a hint of a blush dusting her cheeks. She wasn't angry anymore. She was the Erza only a few were privy to — open, soft and caring.

Underneath all her obvious, infamous strength that everyone knew of, it was this strength that drew him to her.

Oh, he had it so bad.

Gray turned back towards the grass with a sigh. "It all starts tomorrow."

"It does."

"And as hopeful as I want to be, I can't ignore the ridiculous odds, the enemy, or the risks we are taking."

"We will win, Gray."

"We don't know the cost yet." Gray turned

towards her. "And I..I wanted, intended, on spending probably our last few moments in peace with you."

Emboldened by her deepening blush, he continued, spilling bottled up wishes in one go.

"I know your feelings point elsewhere and I don't expect us to do anything as such. But I've missed speaking with you like this — we haven't since Avatar and that was mainly to strategise and well" — Gray ran a palm across his face — "I wanted one moment with you before tomorrow comes. That's all. But then Juvia heard and got jealous about her match-maker meeting me and I just... lost it, I guess. I'm sorry."

He leaned away from her, able to tell that he'd made Erza very uncomfortable. She was hunting for words to say, probably to reject him kindly.

He definitely didn't need to hear that again.

"Right!" He exclaimed, with fake enthusiasm. "That's that. We better be getting back to our stations."

He offered her a hand to help her get up. When she didn't take it, he knew he'd ruined everything.

Until she whispered something.

"What was that, Erza?"

"It didn't seem to bother you with Ultear," she looked up at him, teary eyed.

It knocked the wind out of his lungs.

Dropping immediately to his haunches, he acknowledged, "Yes, that was a little different."

"You thanked me for lending you courage." Her anger now bled into her tone.

"Yes! Because you did!"

"And smiled so wide when you thanked me!"

Gray simply blinked back. Erza was pissed, sure, but now he wasn't entirely sure about what. Not to mention she was full-blown crying.

Over him smiling?

"Wha—"

"Is it so awful of me to want to see you smile like that again, Gray? You hardly even look my way anymore, forget smile. But you get along with Lucy so well, and with Juvia you even lived with her —

"She barged in —"

"— But you would hardly look my way! Unless it was about work or the guild… And I missed you too." She ended her tirade, eyes towards her fists, currently wrinkling her skirt.

"Though it may surprise you, Gray, I have also missed you."

Gray was dumbfounded. Genuinely flabbergasted. This was the most honest she had been since rejecting him and the most emotionally vulnerable since...ever, really.

He was almost overcome with the urge to hold her, lend a shoulder to cry on or at least pat her back, but he forced himself to keep a respectful distance.

Nonetheless, it brought him joy to know that he mattered. At the end of the day, he realised, that was enough. He was being greedy when he was luckier than so many people to

even to be where he was, witnessing what he had. Being trusted like he was. Knowing her the way he did.

This beautiful person, selfless in every possible way, was selfish when it came to him.

This was more than enough, actually.

"I'll tell you what," he said, the jovial tone of his voice grabbing her attention. "Let's make a pact. Let's get this war over with, kick some bad guy ass in style, and promise to spend more time together. We could do picnics, missions, anything you like, with the team or whomever you want. And it'll be fun, and we'll talk like we used to."

His heart skipped a beat as she slowly smiled and nodded.

"That does seem like an appealing proposition."

"Appealing?! I could win the war with this waiting at the other end!"

Erza chuckled, and Gray finally started breathing again. He hadn't lost her.

"For now, I know a good cake place we can quickly stop by," he suggested, rising to his feet and offering his hand once more.

She took it this time, other hand fishing for her hanky.

'Dammit, should have offered one at least,' he chided himself.

"Everyone's evacuated, Gray" she reminded him as she cleaned her face to her satisfaction.

"The guild hasn't, and there definitely is cake there," he promised. He knew, because he'd left it there for her.

"Well, in that case, I'd love a slice or two."

"Yup, after that we'll probably run into each other only once the war is done."

Ew, he hoped he didn't come off as too needy.

"No," she replied, dusting her skirt, "I'm pretty sure we'll end up meeting while saving each other somehow. We always do."

She smiled at him, requipped and moved to lead the way.

"I love you."

Gray's heart was pounding a mile a minute. What had been a hastened, steady thud at her soft smile was now a roaring beat he could hear in his head.

She slowly turned around to look at him and he only sighed.

Shoving his hands into his pockets and silently praying too all deities that he hadn't fucked up again, he walked past her briskly. "Don't worry, I'm working on it. It'll pass somehow."

Lies.

"Don't!"

"What?" He automatically turned to see her, red in the face. His heart felt lodged in his throat.

"Don't work on it."

"Why the hell not?" he asked incredulously.

Erza looked him right in the eye, posture every bit like she was fighting a battle. "I do not wish to you to stop loving me back."

Heart? What heart?

"B-back?" he choked out.

Erza nodded briskly. Her eyes were full of fear and determination. "Was I not clear?"

"No! You were never clear!" Gray raced to her, mere inches between them now.

"Well, I hope I am making myself clear now."

He could see her blush — scarlet as her hair — and her eyes, steady and now full of hope.

For him?

For him!

Wait.

No, he wouldn't buy this.

He couldn't hurt like that all over again.

He leaned in, their noses barely apart — she didn't move back, and that excited and terrified him to no end.

"I need you to say it Erza," he whispered, deep blue eyes boring into hers.

Erza opted a slightly different route. In that she chose to steal his breath with the softest brush of her lips against his.

"I do love you, Gray Fullbuster. It would seem I always have."

Gray wondered if he was actually on fire. All he could really comprehend, with extreme difficulty, was the genuine grin she was gracing him with before she took his palm and starting leading the way once more.

"Come Gray. We have but a couple of hours and a lot to discuss."

'Oh, we certainly do', Gray thought, mouth agape as he let her pull him along. Thoughts straying, he tried to cope with the overwhelming amount of everything he was feeling; he realised one simple fact.

Winning the war was now the only option he had.

And win it, he shall.

Battle Aesthetic *by* ZerefSerigala

Their Monster

by Scarlet RedFox

Erza quickly dodged the icy shards nearly tearing her body to shreds, summoning her sword and requipping into her flame empress armour. Her gaze narrowed, hand tightening around her weapon as she stared her opponents down, the demons made of ice advancing with impressive speed and strength as they kicked up the dirt beneath their feet.

'I am coming…'

One moment, a blast of icy wind headed towards her, the next it hit the barren earth she'd previously stood on, a trail of fire marking her speedy path towards her adversaries.

'For all the monsters that ever touched him…'

The silver horned mask seemed to mock the knight's efforts, the flickering image of Lyon Vastia shifting in and out of existence. Erza first concentrated on finishing off the replica of Lyon in his mask, an evil, echoing laugh sounding from the vacant vessel of what should have resembled Gray's childhood friend. His ice magic wasn't static, making it difficult to dodge his constantly moving creations. He would go down first.

With a pained cry, the figure fell heavily to the ground, vanishing into wisps of snowflakes. Titania turned around just in time to dodge the next attack directed at her back, flipping into the air and sending a tendril of fire towards the master ice mage. Next, she felt herself freeze mid-air, not from the icy cold, but from the freezing of time.

'I am coming…'

Erza grit her teeth, channelling the Nakagami armor with all her might until finally, it enveloped her body and she sliced through the currents of time itself, her improved weapon gifted to her by the celestial spirit king himself, striking down none other than Ultear. The powerful woman fell to her knees, not with a cry, but a relieved smile, the illusion resembling the real Ultear so much it sent chills down Erza's spine. Their first meeting flashed within her mind, when she'd spoken to her about taking care of Gray on Tenrou island.

But she couldn't waste time dwelling on past memories.

'For the ones who twisted his stars into shadows…'

edit *by* gaymirajane

Erza rounded on her next opponent, the elder man with the scar on his face smirking down at her as the ice enveloped her. The flames from her newly equipped armour melting the ice off her before the devastating destruction of the purgatory sword came crashing upon the man, shattering his armour and sending the icy flakes of his remains flying.

The small, almost proud smile disappearing into wisps of snow and dust.

'They turned him into a nightmare…'

She never underestimated her opponents, that's how she sought to win her battles. The chilling sensation that drew goose bumps down her arms spoke volumes of her next opponent's strength, her instincts screaming at the freezing temperature worse than her previous opponent's.

Her body disappeared in a flash of light, re-emerging with a heavy shield and defences as she deflected a lethal blast. Titania took to the skies, dodging another ice shard aimed at her back.

Another flash, another light. Her battle cries echoed through the field with the power to topple mountains. Swords clashed, some against her opponent, others imbedded in the ground. Erza gathered her magic and roared the arrival of his next attack.

Upon Zeref's general came the might of a thousand blades, Blummenblatt raining its destructive force down on the pale man with the scar. Some blades missed, but most hit and with them came the end for the general, the frosty glare in his eyes melting into an expression of gratitude before he returned to the realm of the dead.

'So I'm going to become theirs.'

Light enveloped her panting form again and Erza was clad in bandages and pants, a sword in hand. Despite the blood trickling from her injuries, the fatigue of her body and the burning of her lungs, Erza stood firm, creating an unshakeable force protecting the unconscious man behind her.

Gray.

In Between the Lines (or The Things We Leave Unsaid)

by Artku

Footsteps rustled on the forest floor behind him. The pace and weight of them were familiar. Friend, not foe. Gray relaxed as he heard the chink of her armour. A gentle breeze murmured through the night as she sat down next to him.

"I believe in him," he said eventually. He knew that was why she had come. Their argument over Natsu earlier in the day had left a bad taste in his mouth as well. Enough ill blood would be shed with the dawn. They did not need any between them. "Believing in someone doesn't mean you don't want to protect them," he continued. He looked at her out of the corner of his eye. "Isn't that what *he* does for you?"

Erza hummed a non-committal 'yes.' Her face was troubled.

"Where is he anyway?"

"He will turn up. He always does."

Gray snorted. "You have faith in him too."

Her eyes darted towards him, surprised by the resentment in his tone. "Yes."

Of course, she did. Why would she not? Gray hated the shard of jealousy that stung his heart. He was not as strong as them. He would never be. It did not stop him from wanting the same faith from her.

They were at war. This was not the right time for this.

"I wish you would rely on me, the same way you rely on them." His base nature won out. Why die leaving things unsaid?

"Why would you sa—"

Her words were cut short as Laxus emerged from the trees behind them. "Sun's coming up. We'd better get going."

Gray got off the ground and dusted off his shorts. "Don't die today," he said, holding out a hand to help her to her feet.

She hesitated for a fraction of a second, almost as if she wanted to finish what she had started saying earlier. It turned out she had better control over her base nature than he did. She put her hand in his and let him pull her up.

"You too."

They won. He could hardly believe it. A motley crew of guilds had repelled the invasion of an entire continent and taken down a monster that had terrorised the land for over 400 years. He did not want to think about it. Every time he did, the more absurd it seemed that they had all survived. Maybe they had not. Maybe this was purgatory and none of them had realised that they were dead.

A heavy hand thumped him across the back. "You're bringing everyone down with that face of yours, ice prick!"

"Oh yeah, you want to go, fire breath?" His words lacked their usual bite. He grinned at the friend who, only a few hours ago, he had thought was dead. The smile slid from his face. "I'm glad you're OK," he said, wrapping Natsu in a hug.

Shock stilled Natsu's arms for a moment before they found their way around Gray. "What are you talking about? I'm always OK."

A laugh burst forth from Gray. "Yeah. You always are."

Natsu walked off, his arm raised in farewell. Gray watched him go, grateful that his friend was alive. Grateful that all his friends were alive. Grateful that *he* was alive.

He turned back to his beer only to find that Erza had taken the seat next to his. She watched him, a soft smile dancing on her lips.

"What?" he asked defensively.

"Nothing." The smile grew the tiniest bit wider.

Gray huffed and took a swig of beer. A raucous cry went up as another platoon of mages made their way into the guildhall. Troops from all over the country were filtering into Magnolia for the celebrations. They had *won*. He still could not believe it.

He glanced over at the happy faces around him. "Where's lover boy, then?" he asked Erza.

Her brow wrinkled briefly. "It's not like that between us."

"No? You don't love him?"

She took a moment to answer him. "I do. I always will. But we'll never be together. Our paths are different. We are like railway tracks. We will run side by side but will never meet."

Gray looked at her sceptically. "So what? You'll just never marry, or have kids, or do any of that stuff?"

She rested her head on her hands and looked at him. "The heart has a lot of room in it."

He traced the rim of his beer mug. Silvery dendrites of frost wisped their way across the glass. "And this guy is supposed to just be OK with the fact that there will always be someone else you love more?"

"Not more. Equally. Maybe even less. But never more."

"That's a big ask. I can't see anyone going for that."

She cocked her head at him. "Can't you?"

And Gray, stupid, hopeless, fool that he was, had to admit that he could.

Erza watched him take another sip of his beer. Somewhere to her left, the wizards from Blue Pegasus broke into bawdy, drunken song. The relief and happiness in the air around her was palpable. Yet something still troubled her.

"Gray," she said, "What we were speaking about the other night…"

It took a second for the comprehension to flicker in his eyes. "Forget what I said. Maybe it is better not to rely on me, after all." His eyes slid to where Juvia was sitting, her arms around Meredy as they both sang along with the Trimens.

"What are you talking about? I rely on you." She let out a frustrated sigh and ran her hands through her hair. Words had never been her friend. "You've saved my life countless times before. In the Tower of Heaven. When we battled the Oracion Seis. On the mission to the Sun Village."

His eyes widened in surprise. He fingered the stained bar top for a minute. "I didn't think you'd noticed," he said, looking away.

"Of course, I noticed," she replied. It was her turn to look away. "I just… I didn't know what to say."

"And now?"

Her silence seemed sufficient response to him. He got up to leave. She watched him go, her eyes fixed on the blue-tinged scar on his back. She was overcome by a sense that the future was balanced on a precipice. If she let him go now, it would be for the last time.

Her legs started moving before her mind could catch up. She had to stop him.

When she caught up to him, he was standing by the back door to the guild. Slumped forward, his forehead resting against the wood; pain etched on his face.

She grabbed his arm and turned him to face her. Surprise, shadowed by the smallest sliver of hope, flashed in his eyes. She still did not know what to say. So, she showed him instead. She slid her hands across his jaw, reached up, and kissed him.

He responded immediately. So quick that it felt like he had been leaning in to kiss her the instant she had kissed him. He cupped her face in his hands and returned her kiss with such aching tenderness that it felt like her heart would burst.

They stood like that for a long moment, their arms around each other, speaking through their silence.

"Let's go home," he said, when they finally pulled apart.

She smiled, burying her nose in his chest. "I am home."

by Sou

Distance Between

"I know!! That's why I want to be confident in myself!!" – Gray Fullbuster (Fairy Tail: 100 Years Quest, Vol 3, Chpt 26)

Erza, Gray, and a non-conversation on love, on life and on letting go.

"Boo!"

"Get off the stage!!"

"I did not spend my precious money to watch this train wreck of a play!"

"Is this really Erkis?!"

Erza bows to the audience in satisfaction, despite the heckling from the crowd. This was a step up from her performance as Prince Fredrick in *Fredrick and Yanderica*, where she was so overcome by stage fright that things, literally, fell apart.

This time around, she had managed to keep her act together on stage, without accidentally summoning her swords and threatening the lives of the spectators in the process.

But Erza is not delusional, contrary to what others might think. She knows she has a long way to go before she can call herself an actress and feel comfortable on stage, but acting is just like fighting to her: just another challenge for her to overcome. Acting is also another outlet for her to release steam, without having to resort to an all-out brawl with the other Fairy Tail members.

Speaking of the other Fairy Tail members, Erza really has to get back to the rest of Team Natsu before they find out about her secret swap with Erkis –

"Erza!"

And maybe she really overestimated Erkis' acting abilities, Erza realises, when Team Natsu bursts through the main doors of the theatre, a frightened Erkis in tow.

Ah, no matter.

The play is over anyway, and the team has plenty of time to search for the next God Dragon. A short detour would not hurt anyone.

Erza wakes up at the crack of dawn the follow-

Two Hearts

by AHundredGyozas

ing morning feeling restful and recharged. In the wake of her performance, the team had decided to stay at the Fairy Nail guild for the night. Fairy Nail had welcomed them with open arms, and everyone had spent the evening in true Fairy Nail fashion – revelling over conversation and food, albeit in a more subdued and refined manner than they would have expected back at home.

In some ways, Erza is glad to have had the opportunity to eat, drink and laugh with faces so familiar yet so foreign to her. Still, it is a bittersweet feeling, and she feels a slight pang of longing for her own guild members back at Fairy Tail.

But Erza's not one for sentimentality, and so she psyches herself up for the journey ahead as she pulls her cart of belongings out of her room. A cursory scan of the guild hall alerts her to Wendy saying a tearful farewell to Wendill over at the bar, with the tears streaming down both girls' cheeks signalling to her that they probably would appreciate quite a bit of time to themselves.

Erza sighs, not looking forward to having to shepherd Team Natsu for the rest of the journey. Nodding briefly to the few Fairy Nail early risers who are lounging about the guild hall, Erza drags her luggage outside. She sees Gray standing in front of the guild doors with his hands in his pockets and a faraway look in his eyes.

Gray grins at her as she approaches.

"Geez, Erza," he says with an exasperated sigh. "I still can't believe you would do something so irresponsible."

Erza sniffs.

"As I said last night, I did not plan to remain at Fairy Nail for too long," she says as she parks her luggage next to the guild doors. "Erkis was supposed to cover for me until I found the right opportunity to catch up with you lot. Any idea where Natsu, Lucy and Happy are?"

"No idea," Gray replies, shrugging indifferently. "Natsu and Happy were running around

town again, and I think Lucy set off to find them just now."

Erza gestures to a nearby public bench.

"Well, why don't we sit and wait for them to come back?"

She does not wait for an answer as she trots to the bench. To her surprise, Gray does not move from where he is standing, and so she shoots him a confused frown.

"Nah, I don't feel like sitting down," he says, smiling at her. "Let's go explore town instead."

"Hm. Fine."

Unlike the neighbouring Elmina Town with its easy access to water, the city of Tekka is nestled comfortably in a landlocked region. Although Tekka did not receive Mercuphobia's protection and blessing during his prime, this eventually worked to its advantage, as Tekka was subsequently unaffected by the rampage that had led to the Water Dragon God's downfall.

Tekka is not without its own unique charm, however, and the presence of the main railway station makes it a popular stopover destination for travellers. The steel façade of the station, coupled with the shiny and metallic exterior of the Fairy Nail guild, is juxtaposed against the city's cobbled streets and walls; relics from a bygone era.

It is on these cobbled streets that Erza and Gray find themselves strolling along as they walk away from Fairy Nail. The sun is still far from rising, and there is hardly a soul in sight as they amble towards nowhere in particular.

"Did you sleep well last night?" asks Erza as they walk past an apothecary, which is still closed for business.

"Hmm?" replies Gray absentmindedly, and Erza knows that he is still lost in thought.

"Did you sleep well last night?" she repeats.

"Yeah."

"How did you find the dinner last night with the Fairy Nail members?"

"Good," says Gray, "It's still crazy to me that there are three different versions of Fairy Tail existing in this world, y'know. But even though we share the same physical appearances, everyone's totally different in personality."

"Yes, Fairy Nail's nothing like our own guild," hums Erza. The inn on her left is beginning to show signs of life, and she can smell eggs and bacon wafting out through one of the windows that had been left ajar.

"Yeah."

They lapse into silence, which is only amplified as they walk away from the sound of quiet chattering from the nearby 24-hour café.

It is not an awkward silence, but neither is it a comfortable one.

It is the silence between two people who were once close enough to share their deepest and darkest secrets with each other, but who have since been gradually and unknowingly steered away in different directions by the inevitable force called life.

It is the silence between two people who did nothing to prevent time and distance from

pulling them apart.

It is the silence between two people who knew each other – *once*.

This is something that is starting to feel normal for them, Erza realises. With the invasion by the Alvarez Empire and the resurfacing of Acnologia, and what with the team immediately embarking on the hundred years quest right after Acnologia's defeat, there was never an opportunity for Gray and Erza to talk to each other in private.

Perhaps, she thinks, *it is time for another conversation.*

"It's been a while, hasn't it been, Gray?" says Erza lightly, as they both turn towards the city centre.

"A while… Since what?"

"Since we talked to each other like this."

"Oh, yeah it has, hasn't it?" Gray frowns, trying to recall the last time they both shared a conversation.

"So," presses Erza, "are there any interesting developments in your life you'd like to share with me?"

"Huh? Not really," says Gray, "I mean, we've just been busy fighting, and now we're on this hundred-year quest together, aren't we?"

"True," concedes Erza.

After all, Fairy Tail would not be Fairy Tail without its members constantly engaging in combat.

But there was one particular topic which she was still rather interested in.

"Still, did anything happen… say, between you and Juvia?"

Erza knows that Juvia is a touchy subject for Gray. Although she was not privy to the happenings during Gray and Juvia's fight against Invel, word eventually got around the guild about both their mutual suicide attempts, and about how Juvia saved Gray's life by transferring her blood into his body, thereby sacrificing herself in the process.

Erza thought it almost miraculous the way Juvia was eventually saved by Wendy's healing powers, and Gray obviously felt the same, given how his eyes would light up with newfound respect and devotion whenever he looked at Juvia. Erza also did not miss how Gray paid Juvia more attention after her revival and how he took special care not to hurt her feelings as much as he used to do in the past.

"No," says Gray, with a non-committal shrug of his shoulders. "Though meeting Juvina in Fairy Nail did remind me of Juvia a lot, even though they're not the same person."

Erza hums in agreement, a subtle invitation for him to keep on talking. It is not like Gray to be so forthcoming about his feelings, so Erza lets him continue without interruption.

"You know, Erza, it feels… quite nice," Gray muses, the faraway look returning to his eyes, "to have someone stand by your side."

"Mmh."

"It feels… nice, when the support is unwavering, and unconditional."

"Yes," replies Erza, wondering where this conversation is leading to, although she has an inkling that she already knows.

The faint sounds of the city coming to life add to the tranquil ambience. Behind them, there's a faint clip-clopping of a horse coming from a distance. Somebody is making breakfast in the house next to them, judging by the tantalising smell of pancakes emanating from the open window.

"I feel… safe, around Juvia. Comfortable, safe... and warm."

The two of them enter the city centre. A majestic water fountain sits at the heart of a roundabout, and the soothing sound of the flowing water, punctuated by the occasional chirping of the early birds, washes over the pair like a cool autumn breeze.

Almost instantaneously, and as though seized by a sudden stroke of clarity, the distant look in Gray's eyes is replaced by a determined gaze.

"So…" begins Erza, but Gray interrupts her.

"I don't know much about love," Gray says, seemingly knowing what she was going to ask him. "And really, neither do you, Erza, so you're not actually qualified to give me any advice. But I've realised that I will never know much about love by just sitting about and doing nothing. So, I've decided that if the answer isn't going to come to me, I'm going to go find the answer myself."

Gray clenches his fist.

"I'm going after Juvia," he declares resolutely.

Almost instinctually (or so she would claim afterwards), Erza pulls Gray down into an awkward, one-armed hug. Unable to stop a feeling of bittersweet warmth from surging through her chest, Erza gives Gray's hair a rough ruffle, eliciting a grumpy "ow!" from him in response.

"I am very proud of you, Gray," she smiles after she releases him. "You have certainly matured since I last spoke to you like this."

Gray grins at Erza, for once accepting her compliment without protest.

"Thanks, Erza."

"But… Always remember, Gray," Erza adds affectionately. "What I said to you and Natsu before will forever hold true."

She pauses, fighting back a tear that had suddenly threatened to escape from her left eye.

"I love you — no, the both of you — from the bottom of my heart. And that will never, ever change."

"Aww geez, Erza," scowls Gray as he turns and stomps away in embarrassment, "you don't have to keep saying it, I know already!"

Despite his efforts to hide it, Erza can still see the hint of a smile on his face.

She chuckles to herself.

Silly boy.

"Erza! Gray! Up here!"

A beaming Lucy waves at them energetically from on top of Iron Hill. It is the tallest peak in Tekka, but Gray and Erza clamber up the hill with little effort.

"Took ya long enough to find us," Natsu sniggers at them from where he is seated on the ground, with Happy fluttering around his head like a butterfly prospecting a flower. "Are you guys ready to move?" he demands.

Erza is never not ready, but force of habit compels her to check on her dark-haired companion.

"Ready, Gray?" is what she wants to ask him, but the question dies in her throat when she turns to look at the ice-mage.

Although he may have lost his coat sometime during their walk (yet again), Gray is the picture of poised and confident next to her. Silhouetted against the rising sun, his eyes are alight with a wisdom and gravity that only time could have given to him, and only distance could have allowed Erza to see. It is Gray at his most self-assured and secure, and it is Gray as Erza has never seen before. She is momentarily blinded by him, and it certainly does not help that the sun has his silhouette encircled in a fiery halo.

Gray notices her staring at him, and he smirks at her knowingly. It is a familiar yet unfamiliar grin that Erza strangely does not mind getting used to.

And suddenly, she realises that she does not need to ask him that question any longer.

She smiles at him in return, before turning back to Lucy and Natsu.

"Let's go, everyone."

Extra...

The team arrives at the railway station just in time to catch the train departing at nine. It is then when Erza realises that something is not quite right. A metaphorical weight had been lifted off her chest, no doubt, but somehow there is a lightness about her that feels more physical than emotional.

"I seem to be missing something," says Erza, frowning, just as Gray's eyes narrow.

"Erza, where's your luggage?"

"Never mind *that*," interjects Lucy, her voice a rising crescendo, "where's Wendy and Carla?!"

"No, look Wendy," says Carla hastily, as Wendy wails even louder, prompting a distressed Wendill to pet her on the back in a vain attempt to comfort her distressed doppelganger. "They didn't abandon you — look! Erza's luggage is still here! They'll come for you soon!"

Bonus

by gaymirajane

Gray sat drinking coffee, looking out at the sunrise and wondering why on Earthland he was awake this early. It was the same ritual every day, as soon as his wife left their bed he began to stir. The cold had never bothered him of course, but there was a loneliness to the chill when Erza was not there, an ache which brought him from sleep and forced him outside to watch her train, even if that meant that he was awake before the sun had risen.

There were villagers watching from afar, eyeing up Gray with caution, and Erza with awe. He did not blame them; he would never tire of the beauty of her, either.

Erza's hair was braided tight against her scalp, muscles bulging against her workout clothes as she propelled the sword over her head, slicing through the air with a chorus of grunts. Sweat beaded her skin, her concentration so great that Gray wondered if she even noticed the onlookers at all.

"That's Gray Scarlet." One of the villagers whispered, far too loud to be cautious. "Rumour has it they call him that because he dyes the ground red with the blood of his enemies."

Gray smirked into his coffee. It was a common misconception, one that both he and his spouse had long since gotten used to. He was the man, which made him stronger. That was what everyone assumed. How wrong they were.

"Mr. Scarlet, may I please get your signature?" The other villager spoke, a teen boy with glasses that made his eyes look double the size. A girl followed him - the one who had spoken originally - hand fisted into his shirt, lips drawn down with fear.

"Please, call me Gray."

He took the paper and pencil which was offered to him with shaky fingers, scribbled his name down and passed it back.

"I can ask my wife to pause her training if you want to ask her anything."

The teens shook their heads.

"We have some things to ask you, if you wouldn't mind?"

Gray gestured for them to continue, but they were overwhelmed, unsure where to start when confronted with their idol… even if they were mistaken.

"Is it scary, having people try to kill you." The boy asked, excited.

"It is…" Gray paused, took a sip of his coffee and looked wistfully over at his wife, who

was still expertly thrashing the air. "But it's the price you pay when you marry for love."

The teens blinked, mouths falling open as they understood what he meant. It was custom for people to take the surname of the most prosperous person in the relationship, and often members of the public mistook that for Gray. They were, of course, exceptionally wrong.

"So… *she* kills people?"

They were edging towards Erza, eyes wide, sparkling, intrigued by the woman they now perceived as dangerous.

Gray could not help but laugh.

"No, of course she doesn't." His eyes wandered back over to his wife's athletic form. "She could, of course; she's definitely strong enough. But more than that… Erza is kind."

Even if she had killed someone, Gray did not know if it would make any difference; he loved her too much. It was almost scary, how much he was willing to overlook. How much he could forgive. But Erza was one of the sweetest people he knew, and even if people assumed that he was the stronger or the two, Gray would always know the truth, and ultimately he knew that he was lucky to have Erza by his side.

edit *by* gaymirajane

Stay by My Side, Forever and Always

by JimNaEun

Gray Fullbuster is a teenager who almost has nothing to do, besides listening to international idols working hard for their families to keep them financially stable. He was one of the trainees who moved from Japan to Korea five years ago when he was around ten years old, to be an idol for an incoming co-ed debut group that would be produced by ZYNCHRIZE Entertainment.

Back in Japan, he had a childhood friend: Erza. As kids, they would do everything together, such as martial arts and acting in dramas and movies. He befriended the older girl by trying to comfort her upon seeing her cry, and because of that, he fell in love. It was love at first cry. When he was ten, he had told her that he would not be seeing her for a while. Then he left her a promise necklace similar to his own, so they matched each other.

No one passed the auditions in Japan until three years later, and, lo and behold, it was Erza. They were both excited to be training as idols for a new Co-Ed group, which would consist of both girls and guys. Thankfully, for those years, they stayed together and relied on each other no matter what happened to them.

As they turned fifteen and sixteen, respectively, it was time for them to find out who would debut as part of the new K-Pop star group, THRICE. Only four would endure enough for the official debut of the group. They did a lot of tests such as diet, weight loss, flexibility, dance, vocal control, and finally, rap. Almost all of the idol participants were working their hardest, at all of the practices and trials they needed to accomplish, to fulfill their dreams.

When the final evaluation test was going to start, there were seven contestants left participating: four girls and three boys. Erza felt so worried. She started to hold Gray's hand and lean on his shoulder, shaking nervously.

"Gray?" Erza asks.

"What's wrong, Erza?" Gray asks her back.

"What if... All of our hard work hasn't paid off?" Erza trembles, clinging onto him and trying not to cry.

"Geez Erza, ya ain't gonna fail. Just try to be strong." Gray placed his arm on her shoulder, comforting her.

June 16, 200X

Dear Mom and Dad,

Ever since my childhood days with Erza,
I've been feeling a want to do something that I never should have,
especially due to my three year contract:
Dating her.
I know it's problematic for me to feel this way.
But I've had a crush on her ever since I saw her cry at the river bank,
close by the orphanage we used to be in.
Being an idol is really tough here in Korea,
and only the luckiest and most hardworking will be successful.
I really hope that I debut in the same group as Erza. And three years later, after the debut,
my contract of no dating will end.
I really hope she would say yes to me dating her.

Love you always,
Your son,
Gray

A few hours passed for the flexibility, weight, and height tests. Then the time of the final performances came. The curtains started to rise as the music started, and the theater stage lights illuminated slowly, until it spotted the raven haired man at the center. Gray was on stage, trying to refrain from being nervous and keep himself calm with deep breathing, before starting to feel the beat of the music. His final song was a composition song he took two years to make: "Brightest Light".

As Gray felt the time to sing, he held the mic near his lips and lets out a husky vocal. His voice changed for the past few years ever since he joined and became a lot better at it, but to him, it was not known if he would be passable for the THRICE member lineup.

The rest of the contestants who are going to audition for the THRICE lineup looked at Gray in awe. Stunned by his performance, they were eavesdropping on how smoothly he's been executing so far. Erza couldn't help but be happy for her best friend and started to cry a silent valley of tears for him due to his wonderful performance. The judges too, started to smile, their hearts touched. Some of them cried as much as Erza did.

As the song finished, Gray started to look at the ceiling, a tear cascading down his cheek. The judges whispered some of the comments on his performance, and as they were done deciding, he took a deep breath to calm himself down.

"Gray, your performance today was outstanding. I really enjoyed how touching you composed this song to be," Jae Young, the CEO, said with a serious look on his face.

"I agree." Seol Gu, the female judge wiped her tears, "It was very touching for you to execute a professional performance. Thank you, Gray. I, or we, really enjoyed it." She nodded at him, smiling.

Gray sighed in relief and bowed at them, "Thank you so much."

When the judging criteria was done, everyone was nervous to see the final results for the lineup. "Good Afternoon, trainees. We have the final results for the members to debut as THRICE." Jae Young executed the discussion further to the point where the standards of the company must be met. "Since we already explained how the process would go a while ago, We have decided the members who will be in the permanent lineup."

"The first member is chosen for the things they did for the trainees in order to not give up and rise up. They have also been praised for the amazing vocals that displayed not just today but as the time progressed for the hard work that was made," Gyeom Zhi said.

Every one of the trainees held hands, they breathe and pray for their success. Gray held Erza's hand and stared at her for a little motivation. When Erza looked at him strangely a few seconds later, Gray, being the typical tsundere, turned away and hid his blush in embarrassment.

Erza, however, took a deep breath. Comforted in knowing that Gray was by her side and never ever letting go of their intertwined hands.

"Lucy," Jae Young announced.

Lucy stood there in shock and started to cry as she bowed to the judges, thanking them. The rest of the contestants gave her congrats. And her best friend, Natsu, gave her a tight hug.

"This next member has been chosen for showing their assertiveness with the dedication they displayed. They contributed, and despite the competitive side that they have, still have the control to limit their emotions." Seol Gu said. "Natsu, congratulations, you made it." Seol Gu nodded and smiled.

"Alright!" He jumped in the air and gave everyone a high five as the members gave him a little congrats. After that, he proceeded to Lucy's side, happy that they are together in the same group.

"The third member showed us the capability of how much worth you ask for, you can always earn it. In rap, singing, dancing and also as one of the visuals for this group," Jae Young said.

Gray and Erza held together as one, tighter than the rest of the remaining contestants. As the atmosphere changed, Jae Young sighed in relief, "Gray. You made it. Congratulations." Gray's eyes were tearing up and Erza smiled at him in relief. The two best friends shared an embrace as Gray cried. The other contestants hugged the two together as they congratulated Gray. He later went beside Natsu and Lucy and the three of them shared a hug.

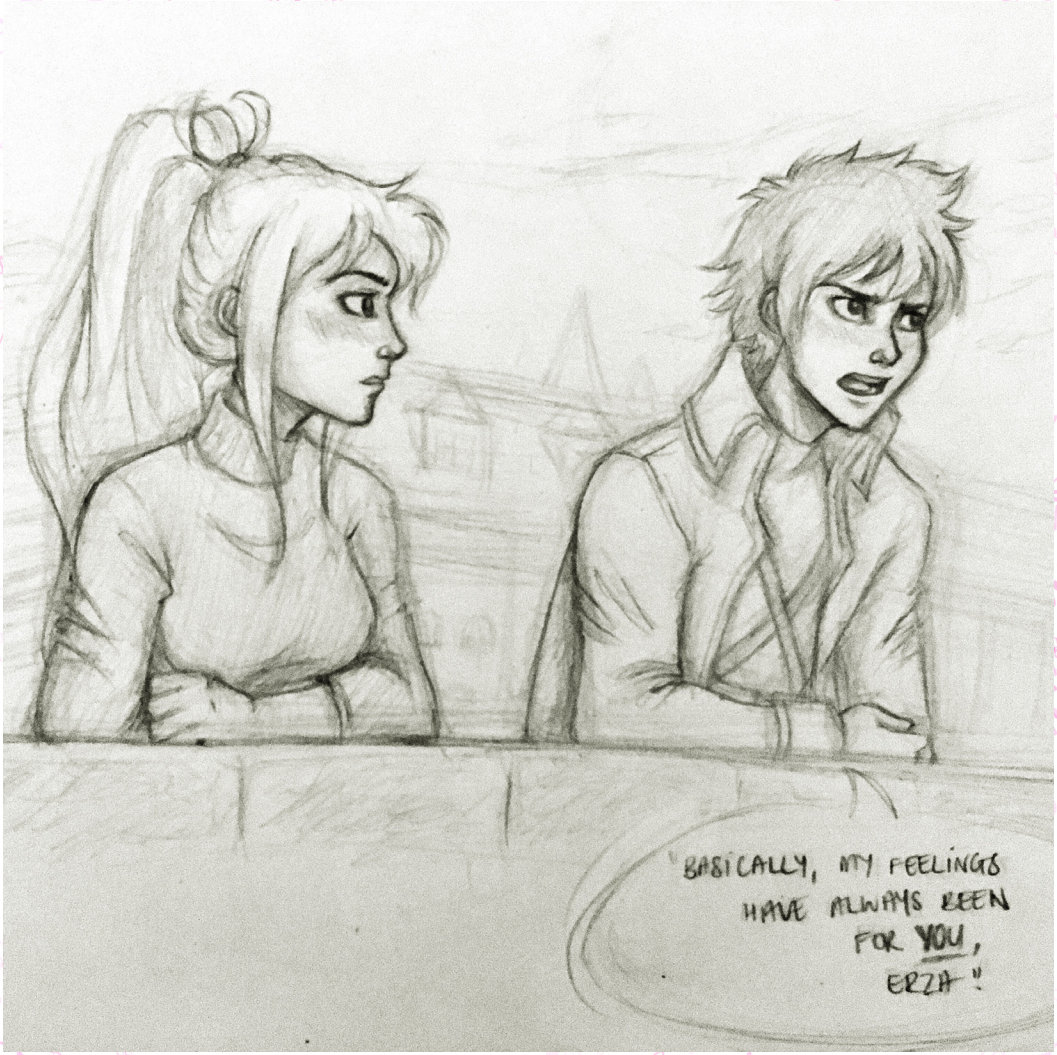
"Erza, Simon, Sho, and Milliana. You have all proven your rightful place to stay for the company, but we can have only one to be the final chosen member for the permanent lineup. They are going to be the chosen leader for this group and have shown a lot of attributes that a leader should have," Gyeom Zhi said.

"We have chosen…" Jae Young added.

Gray was hopefully anticipating that the last member would be Erza. If this happens, he would be happy to be in the same group as her. Erza bowed her head down and closed her eyes to calm herself.

"Erza. You are the chosen leader of THRICE. Congratulations!" Seol Gu smiled at her.

At that moment, Erza was shocked, and crying tears silently. Simon, Sho, and Milliana gave the oldest trainee of the batch a big hug



for her success as the leader and the final member. The three eliminated trainees walked Erza to the chosen members. Gray gives her a gentle hug and while slightly rubbing her back, says to her, "Good Job. Good Job." Erza feels relief envelop her. They made it.

Three months later, the first lineup of THRICE was announced to the public. People are excited to listen to their debut single, "The Truth Untold", in their debut album, "Magica".

When the song was released on October 12, For the first time in history, ZYNCHRIZE Entertainment was increasing in demand of albums not just locally, but worldwide as well. Their success hit was sold out and even concerts were as well.

October 25, 200X

Dear Mother and Father,

Life has been busy, and so far it has been really great!
I really miss you both and hope you can join me as we succeed in our dreams.
Despite that, I really need to focus on doing our concerts
and Trying to find a way to confess to Erza sooner.

Love you always,
Gray

Erza Scarlet, the leader, does not forget that hard work always pays off if you have the effort to do it. Despite having the most responsibility and how tired she is. As the group progresses, the sleepless nights that they have for dance practices, recordings, and interviews escalates. Yes, it is a hard job for her, but in time they'll do great.

For now, after the final concert for their first full album, Gray saw Erza sitting on the couch, KO'd by all of the things they did to travel all over Korea for the past few days. Gray chuckled at the sleeping leader and sat down on the floor at the front of the couch, "This is going to be a long ride for us," he thinks, and carries her to her dorm that she shares with Lucy.

"Oh. Hey, Gray," Lucy greeted silently.

"She's been working hard." Gray smiled at the sleeping girl, placing her on top of the bed and covering her with a warm blanket.

"You've been sweet lately." Lucy approached him and gave a light shoulder smack. "Just for today, though." He sighed in relief at realizing his true feelings were safe.

"Erza's really a great leader." Lucy smiled at her sleeping figure.

"She sure is." Gray nodded in agreement. "Well, I think it's time for me to go," Gray added.

"Wait, Gray!" Lucy halted him, facing him.

Gray raised an eyebrow. "What is it, Lucy?"

"Do you like Erza?" Lucy asks out of the blue.

Gray was silenced by this question, shocked and not speaking a single thing to her for a few seconds. "I don't really know what you're talking about." Gray smiled sheepishly.

"I see," the youngest member fakes a smile, knowingly thinking that her Aniki likes the leader.

"I really need to go now, Lucy." Gray leaves and immediately goes to his dorm.

However he sees his roommate, Natsu, is there and still awake.

"Hey, man! What's up?" Natsu exclaims in excitement as he notices Gray blushing.

"It's nothing. Just a little mixed, man." Gray sighed as he approached his bed. Luckily, the band members have their own beds despite sharing a dorm together.

"Geez, that was so tiring!" Natsu sighed

and laid down on his bed in exhaustion. As Gray saw the younger male sleeping already, he places a blanket over the pink-haired teen.

Gray had always wondered what would be next for THRICE after the debut. But the more he worries, the more he gets stressed. Therefore he gets comfy on his bed and falls asleep in the dark night instead of mulling it over.

The following morning, Erza woke up at around five thirty and saw the beautiful sunset above her. She smiled at the view as she opened the curtains in awe. After that, she saw the youngest member Lucy cooking breakfast.

"Good morning!" Lucy greeted politely.

"Good morning! Aren't the boys awake yet?" Erza asked her with a questioning look.

"Not yet, Ane. I just need to prepare breakfast, then we need to wake them up." Lucy said while concentrating on her cooking.

"Alright then, thanks."

Erza was about to leave but Lucy halted her, "Wait a minute, Ane."

Erza turned around. "Yes? What's wrong?"

"It's about yesterday." Lucy said.

"What about yesterday?" Erza questioned the youngest with a blink.

"It's about Gray." Lucy smiled at the older girl.

"What about Gray? Don't tell me you like him or something." Erza smirked at her.

"W-what?! He's not my type." Lucy exclaimed in anger.

"Sorry, sorry!" Erza laughed at the youngest member. "So what is it, then?" The leader finally said seriously after quelling her laughter.

"Gray really cares for you a lot lately, Erza-ane. What's with him lately?" Lucy finally boiled up the question.

Erza seemed to be asked this a lot from the other trainees but Lucy and her weren't that close back then. "Gray was my childhood friend. He saw me cry once and vowed that he would never dare let me cry from sorrow again. I guess he was feeling sad when he saw me like that." Erza blushes a bit as she reminiscenced.

"You must have a great friendship with him, Erza-ane." Lucy chuckled playfully while still cooking.

After a while, the two ladies started setting up the table for breakfast. Seriously, Erza had not done this before but as the oldest and the leader, she has to do her job right.

Meanwhile, the boys came out of their room looking like they're hungover, which the ladies chuckled and held their laughter.

"Good morning," Gray said simply, approaching towards them alongside Natsu.

"Good Morning, Guys!" The youngest said cheerfully. Erza smiled at the guys.

She sits next to Gray as they celebrate their debut and pray for more debuts to come. Since they were all Japanese KPop idols, the people had learned to love the specialization and diversity of the group, and each member as well. Overall, Gray had the most popularity because of his visuals that stand out. But as a group, they still have no official visual so the company says.

As the few months became two years, the group had been doing very well on their performances. But yet, one member had been having difficulties. The red-haired leader. Some people had bashed Erza because of her low stage presence, especially when it came to dancing. But she can stabilize her voice pretty well, which is a very good thing.

September 28, 201X

Dear Mom and Dad,

I have noticed that Erza has been having a difficult time lately.
The producers and managers may not have noticed it.
But, I've been in doubt that they are making her feel comfortable,
since she makes the most mistakes during the dance routines.
Lucy is the main dancer and she is still trying her best to cheer Erza up, but,
I guess it's not working.
I just hope that she would release her stress.
I definitely need to do something to help her out.

Oh yeah, I forgot to mention! Today is also the addition of two new members.
I know that it will be hard for me to welcome them to the group,
so I need to do my best to be friendly to them.
We are also staying at our old dorm but now we have an extra empty room,
So maybe Lucy and her new roommate are sleeping together for the time being.
Erza has a room to herself after we meet our new members.
There is also one more surprise that we'll have for another year and a half.
It is really possible that the positions will change.

I am really nervous and excited at the same time for all of us.

Love you always,
Your Son,
Gray

Gray finished writing in his diary and gently closed it as he hid it in between his clothes. He went outside to see Natsu, Lucy and Erza waiting for the manager and new members to arrive. It was one fifteen in the afternoon that they were watching television while Erza was almost done washing the dishes. Not long after, A sudden doorbell ring chimed. Gray opened the door to see their manager, Se Kyun, alongside two people. Both with light blue hair. The guy had a mark on his eye almost to his chin, and green eyes, which Gray found strange. And the girl had blue eyes without any pupils. Lucy turned off the TV and Erza approach them.

"Good afternoon, guys. These two will be your new fellow members for your next debut." Se Kyun addressed the two, "introduce yourselves."

"My name is Jellal Fernandes and I'm 18. Nice to meet you. I will be the main rapper

for this group." The newcomer bowed politely. Gray tried to remain positive.

"I am Juvia Lockser, I'm 16 years old. I am the lead rapper for this group." Juvia bowed. Her face was a little dull, but she was polite.

"Seven One! Hi, we are THRICE." The four members greeted.

"I'll leave these two to you four." Se Kyun stood up, bowed and left as she closed the front door.

"So Jellal, Juvia. We forgot to introduce ourselves individually. My name is Erza and I am the leader of this group." Erza started the introduction.

"I am Gray and I guess I'm the former lead rapper," Gray said.

"The name's Natsu Dragneel! I'm one of the main vocalists!" Natsu smirked at them playfully.

"I'm Lucy. I'm the youngest, and the second half of the main vocalists." Lucy smiled at them warmly. "Nice to meet you all."

Jellal smiled at them peacefully. "Same here." Juvia bowed again.

So basically, Erza and Jellal are the oldest, which both of them are 18 years old. Next to Gray, a 17 year old. Then the remaining members, Juvia, Natsu and Lucy are 16. They all talked about themselves personally, but mostly Jellal and Juvia had the most time since they were new editions to the THRICE lineup.

"So you were actually a child model before?" Erza asked Jellal in shock.

"Yeah. I was." Jellal nodded.

"That's why you look so familiar. I saw you on TV a lot to be honest." Erza's jaw dropped.

"Oh really, that's nice." Jellal scratched his head.

Speaking of the group, Gray had a questioning look to the two new members of the group. Thank god that the two newcomers would be in the rap line replacing him and Natsu. The renewal of positions are written on the papers that Manager Se Kyun gave to them. Lucy was reading the new positions of the members as Natsu and Erza are talking to the new members about privacy, trainee life, and all kinds of stuff. They were basically having a fun time.

Every comeback by comeback, ZYNCHRIZE entertainment's preparation for producing music, choreographing dances for music videos, and performing worldwide tours had become more routine for the THRICE members. But for the love of the fandom, some of the new members are given a chance to produce a few of the songs at the studio, and participate in a lot of locations for jacket photo shoots. Don't forget that they are really on a strict diet as well, to maintain their shape for the comeback, since the standards are more on thin bodies. But still some idols that they knew are a bit underweight especially for the THRICE ladies.

For the meantime, as the preparations for the next comeback for this year are getting close, Gray decided to experiment on dyeing highlights to his hair. Specifically mint. However there was one problem, the dance practices were full of mistakes due to Erza. She has not been herself lately and is always being scolded by the producers, managers, and choreographers. This made Gray worried for the leader, feeling bad that she's taking all the pressure as the leader. "We'll do this Thursday Afternoon! I

don't want to see more mistakes!" One of the producers walked out of the picture of the set they are setting up. All of the members were requested to rest and eat dinner for a bit at the dining area.

"You alright, Gray-ani?" Juvia sat beside him while he was eating his dinner. Gray nodded at the younger teen beside him. "Alright, you are definitely not okay. Please tell me." Juvia pouts as her hands gesture a 'please' expression.

"I'm just worried about our leader. She's been overburdened lately." Gray sighed at the actions of the producers. They did what they had to for them to be professional idols but, it was too far to call Erza the "dance hole" of the group.

"She'll be fine, she just needs to follow the routines more and Lucy-ssi can help her with the dances." Juvia nodded as a gesture of reassurance.

Erza had been taking deep breaths for relaxation to release any kind of stress or pressure that was forming around her. She knew that she needed to practice and needed help from her fellow members, but she has to be considerate as the leader to practice on her own terms and be independent. She stares at the mirror. Yes, she may be a visual. Someone who has the best beauty according to the company's standards, but she has to do more than being the visual and leader. Erza needs to stay positive for the success of group image.

As she was glancing at the mirror trying to focus, Jellal approached and gave her a comforting look. "You'll be alright, leader. Don't overwork yourself." The bluenette sub-leader rubs his hand on her back as a comforting motivation for her. She nodded at him and smiled a bit.

By the time the comeback was announced to be coming out next week online, Erza had been nervous about the reviews that they will get since this will be their last comeback as a six-member group.

The members had gathered for a small talk and reflection about having a comeback that will be totally different from the concepts that they are used to executing. But thankfully, as THRICE, they would be grateful for everything even without a first win. They were a group with strong chemistry, and that is all that matters to them.

But wait? Chemistry? Gray realized that he had not had chemistry with Erza lately since they were so busy from the comeback promotions. But it does not stop him from thinking about her and her own well-being.

The final rehearsal for the comeback stage had arrived. Some of the members are nervous about their performance being live. All the preparations for the members were underway, from hair to makeup, accessories, clothing, and a lot more. It was getting pretty exciting for them being one of the nominees for the best visuals and cinematography. Especially Gray and Erza, as they are both visuals for the group.

As they were waiting for their turn in the dressing room, Erza was confronted by Gray. He was wearing a black shining outfit from head to toe that left her stunned by his look for the night.

"Hey, you okay?" Gray asked her in concern, holding her hand. Erza nodded shyly, she was still amazed on how Gray looked, and now he's so close to her, but she's not sure how she feels yet.

"You look handsome." Erza smiled at him kindly.

"Well, its an occupational hazard for being visuals." Gray chuckled at her statement, feeling relieved about how he's with her.

It was time for them to shine. This was the moment that everyone had been waiting for. The members rushed backstage as they prepare to dance and sing their comeback song: Rumor.

As they were illuminated by the lights shining on them, there were cheers that resounded in the arena. They swayed through the beats, with the singing, and the cheers of the crowd.

Erza was focused on her game and kept track of her practices, even though for her, it was not enough. Everyone was amazed on how they performed despite it not being perfect. It was the bridge part of the song and it was Erza's time for the center. She felt that it was going to fall apart, but surprisingly, her dance solo was nailed perfectly for the group's performance. Even the crowd was amazed for her to be brave enough, to be bold for the unnamed fandom, and she received a lot of awe and amazement from the people. Even though her center time was done, the fans were continuing their cheering for her. Even the company producers, managers and the choreographers were a little impressed by her dancing, giving a standing ovation at the end of the performance alongside the crowd. After an ending bow from the group, they left the stage. Cheers and applause still ringing in their ears.

They went back to the dressing room to see the CEO, Jae Young, inside their dressing room.

"Good evening!" The Group greeted politely, and bowed at the CEO who was all smiles.

"Good evening to you, too. You guys made me certainly proud of that performance." Jae Young complimented by giving a thumbs up sign as a symbol of a 'good job'. The group gave their thanks to the head of the ZYNCHRIZE entertainment by bowing.

"I am here to complete the final lineup for the group. There will be one final member who will serve as your main rapper, main dancer and sub vocalist." Jae Young elaborated as the members are listening to him. "You can come out now." Jae Young signaled the surprise member.

And there came out a young girl who is a bit taller than Lucy, with red hair and long purple bangs. Gray was amazed at her look, since she looks a little bit like Erza, but a younger version. But wait. Her eyes were different than the rest, it looked like she was wearing green contact lenses. The girl appeared to be around 15-16 years old. She stood beside Jae Young as she bowed and introduced herself.

"Hello. I am Minako. I am 16 years old." She bows with confidence and smiles at her fellow older members.

"Hello!" They bowed back, as they introduce themselves as THRICE, and gave her a welcoming embrace. That was so caring for the older members to do for the young girl, as she comfortingly returned the gesture.

As the few weeks passed from the performance, the announced winners for the awards had been posted online, instead of on live TV due to the weather. It is raining in Seoul, where their dorm is. They are supposed to stay indoors until the climate will change. Everyone was doing their own personal things such as Jellal and Juvia composing lyrics, Erza watching television with Natsu, Lucy cooking lunch. Gray is about to go to Minako and Erza's shared room. He knocked at the door and saw the youngest singing opera for a while, which amazed him.

"Oh! Gray-ani!" Minako said in surprise as the older guy approached her.

"Hi, how is it going?" He asked her in concern.

"I'm doing great, Ani! I'm also going to practice choreography since I was assigned for dance captain for the group." The youngest answered in determination in her eyes.

"Speaking of dance, can I ask you a favor?" Gray questions her as he sighs.

"Sure. What is it Aniki?" Minako hugs her giant stuffed bear that the group bought for her and listens.

"Our leader, Erza, has been under a lot of pressure in being a "dance hole", as said by the entertainment producers. I am asking for your help to make her less pressured for dancing." Gray pats his hand on her shoulder.

"I see. Does Erza-ane feel a lot of difficulty in some dance moves?" Minako blinks her eyes and tilts her head in confusion.

"She does, actually. Especially because she is the leader for our group. I just don't want her to be stressed." Gray said honestly.

"Sure I can, but can I ask you one thing, Aniki?" Minako obliged at the offer.

"Sure, ask away," Gray said calmly.

"Do you love Erza-ane?" The youngest member asked in a serious tone.

Do you love Erza-Ane? The question was simple but yet it was Gray's choice for him to decide. Both of the visuals had been friends ever since childhood. Yes. Gray Fullbuster is in love with Erza Scarlet.

His childhood friend,

The Leader of THRICE,

His everything.

Those were the words of what she meant to him, and his feelings for her. Yes. It was love at first sight back when he saw her cry. And he promised himself not to make her feel sad ever again. And all of that fits into one answer.

"Yes I do. But I don't think she feels the same." Gray blushed as he revealed his feelings.

"Then why can't you tell her?" Minako smiled at him as she questions him again.

Why couldn't he be honest with her? After all these years of the two being friends, and everything else they've been through? But why? Why not?

"I think she likes someone else. So I'll just hide my feelings." Gray looks down at his hand that forms into a fist. The room was silent for a minute or two. "But, I am fine with her decision whether she chooses to date someone else." Gray turns away at Minako in embarrassment.

"You really need to be honest with yourself, Aniki." Minako stood up as she left the room.

Erza and Minako were practicing together for a month to finish the final dance steps for the upcoming comeback anniversary concert. Minako did what Gray asked her to do, which is to help Erza catch up with the dances and making her feel comfortable. Surprisingly with Minako's help, Erza was able to be less pressured and not have difficulty with it. As the dance captain, the younger girl continued to help

the leader achieve every move without any consultation, just the friendly critique. Nothing else matters.

"Good Job Leader-nim!" Minako cheerfully smiles at the leader as she finished her dance.

"Gee…Thanks, Minako." Erza breathed calmly as she later sighed in relief. She hugged the youngest girl, showing a sign of her gratitude.

"Don't thank me, Leader-nim. There is one person that you should thank because he asked me to do this for you." Minako shooks her head as she told her the truth about Gray asking her to help Erza achieve the dance steps for the comeback.

"So Gray told you, huh?" Erza looks down in embarrassment.

"Yeah. And he also told me about how he…" Minako stopped at the middle of it, "Never mind, you probably don't want to know." she sighed in discomfort and was about to leave, but Erza grabs her shoulder.

"Tell me." Erza says in determination as she stares seriously at the youngest.

The dancing machine took a deep breath there in that moment, "Gray-ani is in love with you." She finally says.

Erza blushes at her statement. All this time she had been thinking about her own best friend and now this. She was shocked on what Minako told her,

'Gray-ani is in love with you'

Yes. Those words. All she ever wanted to hear from him. She smiled at the youngest and gave her a loving embrace like mothers do with their kids.

Minako was surprised at the gesture but yet gave in to her mother figure's embrace. "Can I call you Eomma-nnie?" The youngest asks in a cute tone.

"Sure. Why not?" The leader gave a small kiss on her forehead and caresses it.

One night later, at their balcony at the beach house they were staying for a while, Erza saw Gray outside the terrace.

"Hey!" Erza greeted him with a warm smile.

"Hi, Erza." Gray greeted back as he was staring at the stars.

"I want to talk to you about something." She said with a confidence inside her own body from her veins to her beating heart.

"What is it?" Gray stares at her in awe with a questioning look.

"I am very fortunate that I have you in my life, and I don't really know what it is like to have a friendship with someone I knew for years to be this strong." Erza started as the stars were shining brightly.

"Your welcome." Gray nods in a kind manner, going closer to her.

"I have one question, Minako said that you love me. Is it true?" Erza began to gaze at him in a questioning yet soft look. The air was silenced until it was blown away from the sudden chill of the weather.

With the question spoken by Erza loud and clear, Gray blushes as he nods shyly. She chuckles at his shy confession and tiptoed to

give him a light peck on his lips.

"I love you too, Gray."

Those were the words that he wanted to hear from her for longer than he can remember. He smiled. They continued kissing under the heavenly moonlit sky, with all the seven stars above the universe. It was passionate and purely a true love's kiss.

It lasted for a while, until they said at the same time in jinx:

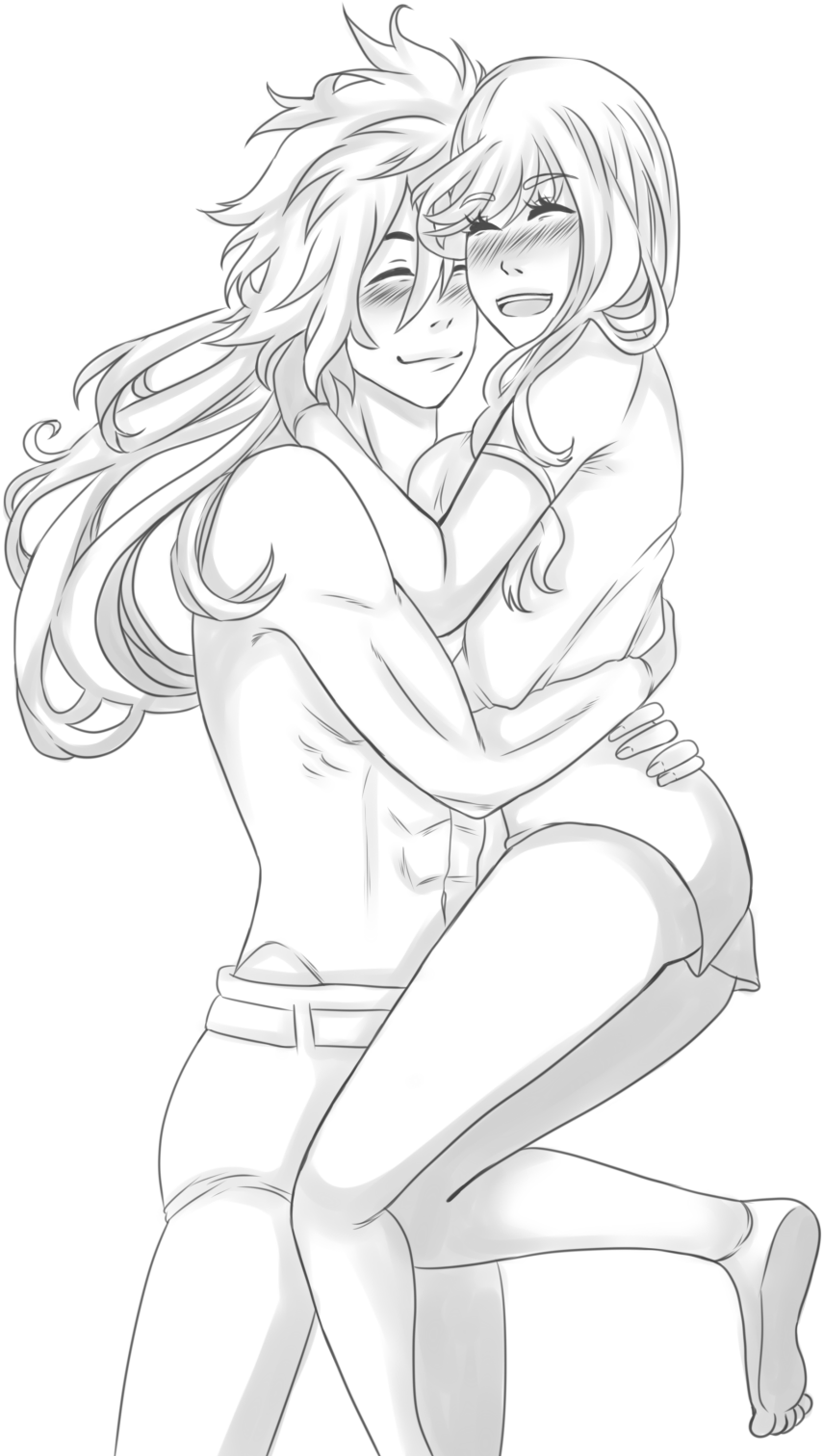
"Stay By My Side, Forever and Always."

Being idols was not easy. However, they have gone three years without dating, as agreed by their idol contracts. But the two still wanted their relationship to be a private matter just between them.

No matter how hard the struggle to confess or the pressure to be a great leader, they already found each other.

And that is all that matters, Right?

by Sou



Interview with
Seductive Grayza Anon

by dennis-t-h-e-menace

Anon#2:

Hello and welcome to the feature segment! It's the interview you've all been waiting for. Yes, that's right, it's time for The Seductive Interview To End All Interviews! Rolls right off the tongue, I know. Are you ready? I sure hope so. Know who else is ready? I'll give you a hint: They've been making people hot under the collars with their delicious little whispers for who knows how long. You guessed it; it's the original Seductive Grayza Anon! Thanks so much for agreeing to this interview! It's great to have you!

Anon#1:

It's my pleasure! I'm glad I had the opportunity to do this interview. I think it's about time everyone finds out the identity behind this mysterious entity, the "Seductive Grayza Anon", so I'm excited to let everyone know and give them some peace once and for all. XD

Anon#2:

Haha! They'll have to wait a little longer, though. First things first: what got you into Grayza?

Anon#1:

Oh boy, a hard question right off the bat? Well, I can't give a specific timeline, for sure, but I started shipping them probably around five or six years ago. Fairy Tail, at that time, was at its peak, so, naturally, I got curious about what the hype was all about. I didn't immediately get into the series, but I did notice two characters and thought they would look good as a couple. Those characters were Gray and Erza. I have this tendency to ship characters first based on their appearances, then get into their relationship's background later, so that's what happened with Gray and Erza. Eventually, I started reading the manga; then, when I reached chapter 89, that was what sealed the deal for me to really seriously ship Grayza. From then on, I became more active in the fandom and looked forward to more chapters featuring the both of them in the manga.

Anon#2:

Ah, yes. Armour of the Heart. So many great moments there, what with Gray so determined to bring Erza back. Although, the flashback scenes were my favourite. Did it upset you that the question of *why* it was Gray's lucky day was never addressed?

Anon#1:

It did! It did upset me! I wanted to know why, and I wanted Mashima to address it directly. I interpreted it as Gray was lucky to have met Erza because she would eventually become a huge part of his life. As a shipper, I interpreted it romantically. For others, it was platonic. So the frustration must be more on the fact that it could've been a romantic hint or not back then.

Anon#2:

I agree with you completely. Wasted potential, right there. Speaking of moments, though, what are your favourite moments with these two? I won't ask for your favourite, since that'll be a hard decision to make.

Anon#1:

It's not hard at all! My favorite moment (or chapter) will always be chapter 89. Not only was that the chapter that made me really ship Grayza, it was just so raw and it gave us a brief background on how they met. Other than that, chapter 282 comes next. It's not as huge as a deal as chapter 89, though it's nice to note that out of all of the people who talked to Erza during that time, it was Gray. It clearly shows how deep their relationship is.

Anon#2:

Wow. That's really precise! The signs of a true shipper. Though I have to ask, what do you like about Gray and Erza individually? What kind of a couple do you think they'd be?

Anon#1:

I always admired how strong they both are, and there are certain aspects of their characters that I really like individually. Physically, I have to say I like Erza more because she is the strongest due to her rank and abilities. I also like how she can remain calm in hard situations, and how she's knowledgeable enough to be able to defeat strong and cunning enemies. Also, I like playing dress-up games, so it's nice seeing Erza change her armor numerous times. As for Gray, he's one of my favorite characters. I like how much he cares for his friends and family. His background story is one of my favorites as well. His personality is funny, but there are times I appreciate him more when he's serious. I like his powers and abilities because I've always had a fascination with characters with ice-related powers. As a couple, I can see them having a mature relationship because of their personalities. They could also be passionate and competitive because of how they grew up together. They will have disagreements, but

they know how to get over it immediately because they know what's more important, and that is their love.

Anon#2:

Your love for the ship really shows. That was seriously an amazing answer, Anon#1. They had so much potential to be healthy and mature, as you said, which we need to see more of in media, if you ask me. But now that the manga is over, would you say your love for them has remained the same? Was there any instance you felt like dropping it?

Anon#1:

The love for Grayza is definitely still here, but it's not as passionate as before. When I lost interest in the series, I dropped it once and for all. Even so, I still ship Grayza. I will be shipping it forever, I guess, since I've invested a lot in the ship to just give it up. During the series' run, there was never an instance that I wanted to give up on Grayza. Probably because I had already accepted the fact that it would never be canonically romantic in the first place. Though I still had some semblance of hope that it might be. Alas, we all know the endgame. It left a bitter taste in my mouth when I found out. Still, Grayza holds a special place in my heart.

Anon#2:

Since you brought it up, really quickly, what do you think of their canon ships?

Anon#1:

In all honesty, I was okay with all the canon ships in the series except for one. I never hid the fact that I hated (I still do actually) Gruvia. The way it was developed doesn't sit well with me and, in my opinion, I felt like it was forced. I wanted to give a more detailed explanation on why I hate the ship, but I don't want to stray away from the main theme of this interview, which is Grayza. As for Jerza, I was okay with it. I knew from the start that Erza really loved Jellal and vice versa, though I wish the ship could've developed more. Both characters were often away from each other to give room for their relationship and love to grow.

Anon#2:

That being said, what do you think of the fandom today? Things are dwindling down. Grayza Week 2019 was a big flop. How does the landscape today make you feel?

Anon#1:

A little disappointed, but I'm not surprised. Ever since the series ended, fans had already moved on or started to move on. Since Grayza isn't a canon ship in the first place, it's only natural that the fandom is dissipating. A lot of the veterans aren't active anymore. Including myself, and I guess personal lives play a major factor. I'm glad that there are still some fans who try and keep the fandom active. It isn't the same as before. Still, the love is there. I mean, to even publish a fanzine such as this one is proof enough. I would like to extend my thanks to the remaining community for this project! It feels nice to reminisce about the good times and to see the fandom still thriving despite the circumstances.

Anon#2:

I think there will always be someone to keep the fandom alive, like yourself. What made you decide to start the seductive anon gig?

Anon#1:

Aw, thanks! I try and do my best to keep the fandom alive; if only I wasn't so busy, then maybe I would still be posting in the tag every now and then. As for the birth of Seductive Grayza Anon, the idea came at a dark time in the fandom. The tag was constantly plagued with hate back then, so I thought to myself, 'how can I make it happy again?' Since the

hate mostly came from anons, I thought 'why not be an anon who sends positive messages?' And thus, I created another account and donned the mask of Seductive Grayza Anon. It started off simple at first, but as more and more people started to follow the blog, I began to think of creative ways to send messages or to "seduce people". I often came up with prompts, single paragraph stories, and anything related to Grayza. It was fun while it lasted. I wasn't able to maintain it anymore because I started to become busy with college and then eventually I graduated. Then I got a job. Out of curiosity, I decided to visit the tag one day and then discovered someone in the fandom started spreading positive Grayza anon messages again. I was surprised and, at the same time, amused. Seeing how there was someone who could continue my work, I sent out an announcement for the mysterious anon so I could pass on the mantle.

Anon#2:

Heh. One seductive anon to another, I appreciate your efforts. It was hard work. But I had a lot of material to be inspired by. How did you land on "seductive" though?

Anon#1:

Thanks! I appreciate your efforts, too! Your bravery, as well, for picking up the mantle. When I was coming up with a name, "Grayza Anon" was too plain for me. The adjective "seductive" came to me later on when I realized that most of my drafted messages were a bit dirty. I was also experimenting with the smut genre at that time. Hence, "Seductive Grayza Anon".

Anon#2:

Yeah? How did the smut experiments go?

Anon#1:

Let's just say it was very productive. It did help me write the fanfic gift for the Grayza Secret Santa event.

Anon#2:

Did you contribute to the fandom before you became Seductive Anon?

Anon#1:

Yes! I was only posting opinions and rants on chapters at first. When the first Grayza Week started, I was also a contributor. I only wrote one-shots, though. I wanted to contribute by making graphics, but I didn't have the skill.

Anon#2:

Why'd you go to such lengths to stay anonymous?

Anon#1:

I wanted to stay mysterious. Not knowing who sent the messages was part of the appeal. A small part, though, was that I was embarrassed with what I was saying in those messages.

Anon#2:

Haha. And about those messages; did you have a plan? How did you keep coming up with them? Did you craft them specifically for different people?

Anon#1:

I came up with a theme each time I sent out messages. For one day, I would send out fluffy messages and then the next smutty messages. I wanted to cater to the recipient's personality at first, but it took too much time. Since the followers kept increasing, it was hard messaging all of them, so I decided to do 20 a day and so on. I just did a random draw on who would be receiving the messages. When I ran out of ideas, sometimes I just sent out simple messages like saying hi.

Anon#2:

What was the initial reception like? Before

it became a thing, were people accepting? Weirded out? Were you nervous when you sent out that first whisper?

Anon#1:

I was nervous when I started sending out the first messages. But the reception was good! Everyone was excited by the prospect of receiving such messages. There was no negative feedback and some even sent in suggestions.

Anon#2:

What's your best memory from that time? Maybe a favourite whisper or suggestion?

Anon#1:

I had to pull up the blog's archive for this one. I wasn't expecting a great response with the messages I sent, but I loved that I got fanarts out of them! It was a very nice treat from our talented Grayzanians. My favourite whispers would have to be when I sent in the angsty ones. Those were very hard to write because it was painful. The responses from those were great as well since the recipients felt the hurt.

Anon#2:

What is Grayza without some angst, eh? But looking back now, how would you say you changed the game for the fandom?

Anon#1:

Oh definitely. Angst was always an easy genre to work with when it comes to Grayza. In my opinion, I think I left a lasting impression in the fandom because of the stunt I pulled with Seductive Grayza Anon. It was a very entertaining moment back then; too bad I wasn't able to maintain it for very long. It wasn't a major change to the point it brought attention to the other fandoms; still, it was a nice change of pace from what was happening back then.

Anon#2:

When did you stop following FT?

Anon#1:

I dropped Fairy Tail around the last arc when Erza's mom first appeared. I wasn't happy with the direction the story was going, so I decided to drop it. I just Googled the ending, and, when I found out, I didn't even regret dropping it. Mashima has the tendency to bring characters back to life after killing them and killing off characters even though it was unnecessary. There were some characters whose potential were wasted just for shock value. After everything, I still have a place for it in my heart.

Anon#2:

Do you stay updated with the spin-offs?

Anon#1:

If you mean "Fairy Tail Zero", sadly, no. Ever since I dropped the main series, I lost interest in Mashima's other works. I want to try and get into his new one, "Edens Zero", but prejudice is getting ahead of me.

Anon#2:

Haha, I don't blame you. Go for it if you're feeling brave is all I'll say. As we wind down here, though, I gotta ask this: why choose to unmask yourself now?

Anon#1:

Someday. AHAHAHAHAHA! For now, I want to focus on the anime I'm currently invested in.

I didn't originally plan to reveal my identity, but looking on it now, I think it's a proper send off to my Fairy Tail/Grayza days. The dead blog has been haunting me, so I felt guilty about abandoning it unintentionally. I kept looking for a perfect time for the identity reveal, but I couldn't seem to find it. When a Grayza fan-

zine was greenlit and I was approached for an interview about Seductive Grayza Anon, it was a perfect opportunity, so I seized it.

Anon#2:

Before we get there, Seductive Grayza Anon, are you happy with the work you've done?

Anon#1:

It was deliciously gratifying while it lasted! I didn't regret any of it at all.

Anon#2:

Well said. And now is the part many readers will have been waiting for. So, Seductive Grayza Anon, who are you?

Anon#1:

Ladies and gentlemen, I am proud to present the identity of Seductive Grayza Anon! She is none other than myself, un-assassino, a long time Grayza fan and retired fandom menace. Thank you, everyone, for joining me on a wild ride during the glory days!

Anon#2:

Did anyone ever guess it right?

Anon#1:

Nope! AHAHAHAHAHA!

Anon#2:

Now that it's all out in the open, are you looking forward to retire from the fandom? Most of us are gone or are on the way out.

Anon#1:

Not really looking forward to it but more like it's time. With the series already finished and with most of the fans gone, I see no reason to stay any longer. My love for Grayza remains, and I'm glad to be a part of the fandom that shares my love for them.

Anon#2:

Just because we're going doesn't mean the ship's dead. New shippers are still trickling in, slowly. What do you want your legacy to be for them?

Anon#1:

You're right! Fairy Tail did leave a mark, so it's no surprise there are going to be new fans of the series. With these new fans, of course, some of them will also come to love Grayza just like we did.

I want them all to know of the glory days. I want them all to know that even though we're gone, we left behind good, and even bad, memories of the ship. I want them all to know that even though Grayza isn't canon and despite knowing beforehand that it wouldn't be, the fandom enjoyed sharing their love for it nonetheless.

Anon#2:

And with all that, keeping in mind all the history, all the friendships, all the ups and the downs, what is your final message to Grayza shippers old and new?

Anon#1:

To my fellow Grayzanians, thank you all for sharing your love for Grayza! Even if you're an old fan or a newbie, I'm happy that you came to love Grayza. I hope you will continue to love it and cherish it forever!

The Promise

by WolFang1011

The mounting temperatures had prompted him to take a riverside stroll, and Gray wasn't one to say no.

He left the crowded guildhall behind him, having said his goodbyes for the night. Everybody was pretty excited. The S-Class exams were almost upon them, and everyone had been working overtime to make sure they were taking part. Now that the participants had been announced, they could all kick back for a while. Enjoy themselves. And if there was one thing that the members of Fairy Tail knew, it was how to enjoy themselves.

Evening fell silently around him, soaking up the noise from the guild. The streetlights came alive as he walked past, doing what they could to hold off the darkness. To make everyone feel safe and secure. Yet, only when he left the city centre behind and took the shadowy path did he share the feeling.

Gray had been coming down there ever since he was a little boy. He knew every turn and bump on the road. Back then, when people were more comfortable with the darkness and less obsessed with illuminating every corner, he would come here — oftentimes alone — and sit in the tall grass. The river was quiet and, bathed in the pale moonlight, struck a rather mesmerising picture to his young mind. And on some rare nights, as he made his way through the grass, he would dislodge and disturb hundreds of fireflies, who took to the skies in protest. Surrounded by the soft, blinking lights, Gray never felt threatened by the darkness. He doubted that would ever change.

Shame nobody new comes by, he thought, humming. The riverbank had a remarkable way of lifting one's spirits. It had an eerie talent for attracting the prettiest things to its bosom. That night seemed to be no different.

Erza was there. Of course she's here, he thought, coming to a halt. She sat under the shade of a tree, making it look as if the moonlight was bending around her presence. The thought made him smile, but he believed it. If anyone could command moonbeams, it would be Titania.

She sat leaning back on her arms, her feet stretched out and her head tilted back. Over the gurgling river, he could hear faint musical notes.

Erza was humming.

It wasn't very often, if at all, that Erza exhibited any musical talent. Once she was hyped up, sure, but never without prompting. She could be rather shy when it came to that sort of thing, despite what people said.

He stood there on the path overlooking the slope, listening and swaying to her humming. It was a tune he recognised — an old love ballad about a soldier coming home, and his wife tidying up the house and making his favourite treats to mark the occasion. Gray knew very well Erza's love for romance. Seeing it up close now… well, it was rather adorable.

When the song ended, Erza sighed and sat up straight. She pulled up a leg and wrapped her hands around her knee. Her mood had shifted and before she got lost in whatever else was now clouding her mind, Gray stepped onto the slope. The crunching grass made enough noise to alert her of his presence and she swivelled her head around.

"Of course you're here," she said, the corner of her lips quirking up into a smile that was almost a smirk. "Come to challenge me?"

"Perish the thought," Gray replied with a grin and made his way down to her. "My days of fightin' for self-worth are done. This seat taken?"

She shook her head. "Help yourself."

So he did. He sat beside her under the shade of the tree. Close enough to breathe the sweetness of her scent, but not so close that they would accidentally touch. There were boundaries. For him, at least.

"I'm proud of you," she said when he'd settled in. "Two years in a row you've qualified for the S-Class trials. Excited?"

"As much as I can be, I suppose," he replied, somewhat hesitantly. In truth, he really wasn't all that excited anymore. "Just wanna get one over ol' scaly brains, is all. If I do that, then I'm a happy guy."

"The best way to do that would be become S-Class before he does, no?"

"I suppose."

"And you've picked a good partner." She nodded to herself. "You and Loke complement each other's abilities well. You always do your best fighting around a melee combatant."

Gray shrugged. "You could say that. We were friends before he became Leo full-time, and he owed me one."

"Still. Among all the other teams, I think yours stands the best chance. Martial ability wise." Erza paused and coughed into her hand. "Not to say that I'm biased, of course."

"Of course," Gray chuckled and turned towards her. "Titania havin' a favourite in the race would be just unethical. Who knows, ya might just start goin' easy on people."

"That would ruin the sanctity of the test." She shook her head rapidly, as if vowing to herself. "I want everyone to succeed, but me going easy would help nobody."

"I know, Erza. Are you excited? To be one of the tests, I mean."

The tests were different every time. This year, the Master had roped in the guild's three S-Class mages to act as roadblocks to be overcome in the first round. The prospect of having to fight Erza had deflated him when he heard the news. Apparently, Erza didn't feel the same way.

"I am. It gives me a chance to personally gauge the progress of whoever comes my way." She looked right at him. "I hope it's you I face."

Gray had known Erza for over a decade and liked to think that he knew her rather well. He knew that she didn't beat around the bush. Her idea of diplomacy involved headbutting people. And yet, her bluntness still somehow managed to take him by surprise.

Seeing the shock etched on his face, Erza chuckled apologetically.

"Sorry, that was too direct. Allow me to rephrase." She cleared her throat, then smiled at him and patted the grass between them. "It was here that you found me that day and became my friend, Gray. It was also the day that you stopped challenging me. I know just how accomplished a mage you've become in the time since. I've seen it myself."

She stopped abruptly as a sudden breeze blew her hair into her face. Sighing irritably, Erza let her hair down over her shoulder and started picking out the leaves that had gotten caught in her locks. Gray, though he appreciated the break in her explanation, found that he couldn't look away.

"As I was saying, I've seen personally just how much you've improved. You've become a strong mage. You're strategic, and that, paired with your efficient and versatile nature, makes you dangerous. And I want to test myself against you," she said nonchalantly, combing her fingers through her hair slowly and systematically. It was almost hypnotic to watch. "I've heard all the rumours as to why you don't fight me anymore. Some say you're afraid. Some say you've figured out the secret to beating me and don't want to throw it in my face. Some even say that you're in love with me."

Whatever trance Gray had worked himself into fled at those words. As panic rose to replace the wonder in his heart, he sat a little straighter.

"You, uh, you don't believe any of that, right?" he asked cautiously, dreading the answer.

"Of course not," Erza replied, much to his relief... and some disappointment. "I don't believe anything unless I hear it directly from the person themselves." She offered him a smile. "I won't press you for answers, but I'd be lying if I said I was never curious."

Gray stared at her. One of the things he so admired her for was her honesty. She just... said things. It was a simple, straightforward thing that he was often jealous of. And sometimes, he hated himself for not being able to return the favour. No matter how much he wanted to.

There were moments, however, when he knew that if he didn't say something, it would go unsaid. Almost always, invariably, that had been the case. Besides, there were worse fates than telling someone how you really felt about them. He trusted Erza enough and knew that if it came down to it, their friendship would remain intact.

But that wasn't what frightened him.

"I... have my reasons," he told her eventually. Then he stopped and took a deep breath. Here goes. "Actually, Erza-"

"Shush."

He blinked, surprised. "But-"

Erza shook her head, still plucking leaves and twigs out of her thick locks. She smiled gently. "I don't need to know. Not right now."

"Then?"

"Hmmm. I believe, Gray, that when two warriors cross blades, they communicate on a much deeper level than usually possible between two people." She turned her face up and smiled at the sky, closing her eyes. "Yes. I believe it. In battle, there is no margin for error. No room for falsehood. There is nothing more pure, more noble or more truthful than an honourable duel. There is only action and response with only seconds to think. You can scarcely get more honest than that." Then, she turned that smile his way. "And I know that when we fight next, I will know why. It's why I hope it is you I fight."

For a very, very long moment, Gray sat transfixed, digesting the enormity of what she had just told him. She wanted to fight to get to know him at his most primal, at his truest. Stupid as it may have sounded from anyone else, Erza's conviction really painted the notion in a romantic light. And he knew that she was being sincere. She was always sincere.

Slowly, he reached out and peeled off a single leaf from the side of her head that had eluded her. His fingers grazed the shell of her ear, and he swore he felt a jolt of electricity shoot up his arm. It was absolutely exhilarating. Was this what she meant?

Looking at her gave him no answers; she had ducked her face, letting her hair fall over in front like a curtain. Whether it was to hide or to more efficiently hunt stray leaves he didn't know, but not having to make eye contact gave him a small boost of courage.

Gray pulled his hand back and gulped. "All right," he said. "The next time we fight... whenever we fight... you'll know." He was silent a moment. Then he added, a touch more quietly: "And I'll have your answer."

If what she said was really true, then that sort of communication went both ways. If he was at his most primal, then she would be, too. In any fight, extra weight would slow people down. So they went in, holding on to the things that were most intimate, the intangible things that defined who they were. Things they couldn't do without.

If he was going to be that open, Erza would be, too. Everything that needed to be said would be said without speaking a single word.

Gray liked that. It was, after all, how they worked.

And in the silence of the shade, by the riverbank they both held dear, he heard a muttered reply from the woman who had stolen his heart.

"Yes," Erza said, straightening and throwing back her hair. She smiled, somewhat shyly. "You will. The next time we fight."

Gray nodded, returning the smile. "The next time we fight," he repeated.

On that summer's night, a gentle promise was made between star-crossed souls, with only the river as their witness.

And in that moment, Gray was never more grateful about how nobody came by the riverbank anymore.

(While sparring)
Gray: I win.
Erza, confused: I have you pinned to the ground.
Gray: I know.

Gray: Have you been yelled at by Erza yet?
Natsu: I'm not scared of her.
Gray: Mhm, so that's a no.

Incorrect

Erza: You're late.
Gray: You're stunning.
Erza: ...
Gray: What? I thought we were stating the obvious.

Erza, holding a speech: Beauty is in the eye of those who see it.
Also Erza: But if you say Gray isn't handsome I will be forced to correct your vision.

Erza: Okay, everybody goes to bed. I'm sending your father in there!
Kids: Woah, we're so scared!!! *laughter*
Erza: And then I'm coming in!
Kids:*immediately go quiet*
Gray: I'll just go check to make sure they're still breathing.

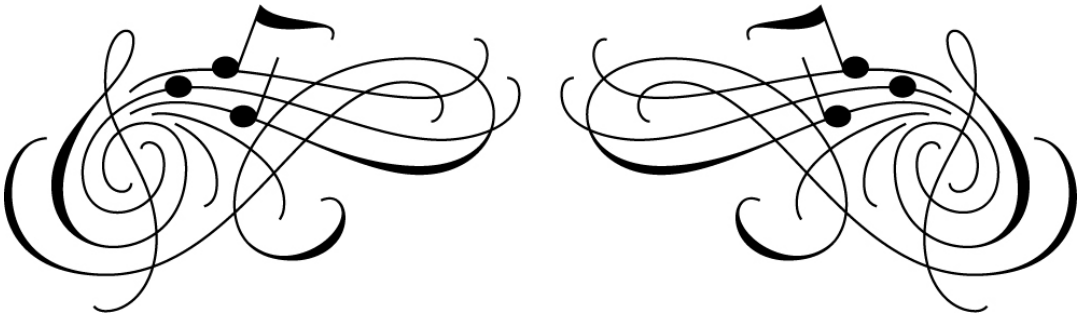
Lyon: So you have 12 cakes and your girlfriend asks for 6 – what do you have?
Gray: A girlfriend.
Lyon: But that's—
Gray, arms crossed over his chest: Correct from all points of view

Gray: [walks up to microphone during his and Erza's wedding reception; taps on mic, everyone smiles]
Gray: Anyone that doesn't want their cake, pass it to my wife please.

Grayza Quotes

compiled *by* starxchildx

Erza: this is Gray, my ex-boyfriend
Gray: (whispering) I told you to stop calling me that
Gray: I'm her husband



The Solitary Knight

by WolFang1011

Though the guildhall now had an open air café, Erza wasn't in the mood to be outside. Or around people. Of course, the guild's main hall was rather empty at present – most people were either recovering or out on jobs. The Fantasia Parade was lively every year, but this time it really… took the cake.

Her lips curved up fractionally at the joke, but it didn't turn into a true smile. She didn't think she had it in herself. Not right now.

The corner she'd chosen was sufficiently shrouded by shadows even though she had a window to look out of. Outside, the setting sun cast a tremulous red sheen on Magnolia, which seemed fitting. The city, along with their resident guild, seemed to be in mourning.

It showed in how the Master hadn't spoken to anyone. It showed in how Mirajane had filled the bar with sad music. She didn't mind it, though. There was a deep, soul-rending melancholy to the piece and it didn't disguise itself. Didn't try to be energetic. Didn't try to be bouncy. It just… was. Content with its ability to acquaint people with their inner font of grief, and nothing more.

There was a lesson in there somewhere, though Erza was unwilling to look for it. She sighed out of her nose, cheek in hand, and traced her fingertip lazily around the rim of the conical glass. Apparently, doing that could elicit a musical response from glasses sometimes. She wondered if that music would sound equally as mournful, whether the drink dictated the sound or whether the drinker's mind warped the music to suit their needs.

Shaking her head, Erza hooked her fingers under the cone, squeezed the stem, and lifted it to her lips. The combination of salty and sweet painted a pretty picture inside her mouth. Equal parts gin and vermouth. Even through her grief, Mirajane was a professional.

Erza held the glass and swirled it. The olive, skewered by a toothpick, bobbed on the surface of the green liquid. As the dying rays of

the sun lit up the glass, it reflected an ethereal glow back into her eyes. Something only she could see. With a derisive snort, Erza set the glass down. This was exactly what she'd come to the guild to avoid.

Something only she could see. Something on the edge of her mind that she was too frightened to voice. She had turned the notion around in her the safety of her mind, but what if saying it aloud made it real? Could she deal with it?

Still… if Mystogan really is…

It wasn't the opening of the door that stopped her thoughts. Neither was it the footsteps that approached her lonely table. No, what stopped Titania's thoughts in their tracks was the soulful scent of Fantasia strawberry cheesecake wafting through her nostrils and laying siege on her brain.

"Here," said Gray, placing a box bearing the Fantasia crest on top in front of her. "My treat."

It was very difficult, tearing her gaze away from the box, but she managed it. She even cracked a smile for her friend. "What's this about?"

He sat down sideways on the chair across from her, one arm slung over the backrest and the other on the table. He shrugged. "I ruined the one you were eating during Gajeel's concert. Figured I owed ya one. Consider it my tribute to Miss Fairy Tail."

There it was again. Gray, with his nonchalant concern, had always been a constant in her life. He was always the one most vocal about her well-being. Whatever happened, he was there right beside her. The fact that he brought her cake was a bonus.

"Thank you," she murmured, her voice choked by the surprise assault of building emotions. She pulled the box closer and opened it, hoping to distract herself with the scent.

"Anytime. Tuck in."

So she did. She set the martini aside and focused on the cake. The sweet aftertaste cut through her melancholy like a sword through a pumpkin. Erza had tried to convince others time and time again that there was never a bad time for cake, but if they didn't listen, it only meant more cake for her. As far as she was concerned, that was a good thing.

After feeding herself a few spoonfuls, she glanced at Gray. He sat silently, eyes closed, swaying to the music. He seemed relaxed, as if he hadn't just achieved the impossible yet again. Erza had never ceased to be surprised at his ability to find her when she least wanted to be found. Not only that, but the way he managed to wade into her bubble of isolation without it feeling intrusive… it was nice. She didn't know whether it was a talent on his part or whether she allowed him special privileges, but having him around was always nice.

He still wore the scars from the previous fight; she noticed upon looking a bit closely at him. Though mostly hidden, she spied some bandages peeking out of his sleeve. It wouldn't last long, she knew, but she rather liked it when he was fully dressed. Something about being exposed to the world with nothing to protect oneself still didn't sit well with her.

His drumming fingertips caught her eye next. They were dancing with the ebb and flow of the piano, perfectly in sync. It took her a moment to realise that he was playing the notes on the table.

"Do you like this music, Gray?"

He hummed, but did not open his eyes. "I've heard it a million times. I love it."

"What is it called?"

"Goodnight Julia."

"Ah." A pause. "Do you not find it too… melancholy?"

"I find it suits me. Sometimes, when I'm drinking alone, I'll ask Mira to play it for me. It's for people who want to be alone, but not lonesome." He smiled. "Maybe it is sad. But you can't deny that it's beautiful."

"You find beauty in melancholy."

"I guess. Whether it's music, or a painting, or a beautiful woman sitting by herself in a bar, drinking… there's a story in everything."

She felt her cheeks burn at his offhand comment. Grateful that he had his eyes closed, she tucked a coil of hair behind her ear and said, "And you like exploring these stories?"

"No. Not always, anyway. It's not my place." This time, he turned towards her, smiling. "I just like existing near them. Experiencing."

Erza ducked her head and scooped up another spoonful. The sun had set, and Mirajane had turned on a few lights. Although it wasn't dark, there were shadows enough in their little corner to shield them away from the rest of the world.

"You like the piano in this piece," she pointed at his fingers, and he stopped drumming. "It shows that you've listened to it many times. You are never off beat."

"I can play it on the piano. I can't help myself sometimes."

"Really?" Erza raised an eyebrow. "I didn't know you could play."

"Yes, well, I go to great lengths to not advertise it." He laughed. "Really, it's no big deal. Like your cake?"

She hummed, mouth full, and nodded. Gray smiled and nodded back.

"D'you remember what I told you after everything that happened at the Tower?"

Though the change of topic was abrupt, it wasn't wholly unexpected. Erza had been waiting for him to speak his mind one way or another. On some level, she knew every move he was going to make. In turn, she was certain it went both ways. But if anyone was to read her, she was glad that it was him.

"I do," she replied after swallowing her mouthful. "You asked me to not worry you anymore."

"And yet, you tried to do it by yourself again."

There was no anger in his tone. He was perfectly casual, but Erza knew that he wasn't saying everything that he'd come to say. So, she took a breath, and remedied that.

"Gray, if you think I won't do whatever I can to protect the people that matter to me, all because of a request you made of me, then I am sorry, but you are going to be deeply disappointed. Destroying the lightning lacrima was something that needed to be done, and I had the power to do it. It behoves me to try."

"I know," he sighed. Erza blinked. His resignation caught her by surprise. "I know. You

can't help it. You have a compulsive responsibility gene."

She couldn't help the snort that escaped her. "Well, excuse me, then."

Gray, too, smirked but went on regardless: "I know you're not gonna stop tryna shoulder all the burdens yourself. It's just who you are. It's so… annoyingly deep-seated in your soul that if it were ripped out, you wouldn't be you anymore. You weren't as reckless, and I hope you're over your death wish phase-" Erza frowned. "-but you'll never, ever stop being the shield for everyone else. I know that now."

He paused, and Erza saw him chew his cheeks. She half wanted to reach out and slap him, tell him that it was a bad habit, but then he stopped and shrugged his shoulders.

"So I decided you won't have to do it alone," he said simply.

That… that gave Erza pause.

"What?"

"For as long as I live, and for as long as you decide to keep doing this, I'll do everything in my power to lessen the burden on you. However little I can do, know that I'll do it regardless of whether you ask me to. I'm tired of seeing you get hurt and injured and having nobody to back you up." He stopped and took a breath but didn't look away. "Erza, you have no idea how much you mean to me, and you will never have to carry all your burdens alone. Not anymore." He offered her a smile and added a touch cheekily, "I so swear."

Maybe it was the conviction in his tone. Maybe it was the sincerity shining in his eyes. Or maybe it was something far more intangible hanging in the air between them, that Erza dared not name, but his words touched a chord with her. Her emotions were always easy for him to tap into. Why that was, she had no idea. It was annoying how much his words affected her.

"Thank you, Gray," she said, again murmuring through the building cloud of emotions. "I—"

"I won't let you down," he interrupted her with a smile that made her heart quiver ever so slightly. "I promise."

He then reached out and squeezed her wrist. A reassurance, she knew, but the warmth that exploded under her skin at that barest of touches left her slightly breathless. Erza nodded dumbly, hoping against hope that Gray wouldn't notice the burning in her cheeks.

Whether he did or not, she didn't know, but he patted her wrist, whispered, "See you later, then," and got up to leave. Erza watched him go. Somehow, Gray had managed to swoop in and give her a gift that she still couldn't wrap her head around. Where everyone else had told her to stop, to change, here was someone willing to walk over the coals right alongside her. That took a special kind of stupid.

Smiling to herself, Erza closed the empty box of cake and took a sip from her martini glass. She took her time with the drink, turning a lot of things through her head, but she could no longer remember why she was melancholy in the first place.

Trust Aesthetic *by* ZerefSerigala

feature segment

Why Grayza?

Grayza was actually my first ship in this fandom and although it's kind of been lost to the void rn and you've opened up my flood gates so uhh….. here we go kids:

- The thing that makes me most salty? The potential. I might be going off on some stuff that you don't think of is relevant but oof. I'm gonna do this chronologically but also from memory so @ me if i make a mistake!!

- I started shipping them on Galuna Island, specifically when Erza falls down the hole that Lucy sets up for Lyon. Gray calls her cute and blushes and, for me, it was like he saw her properly for the first time. Before this Gray had just reacted to Erza in fear or confusion, and I think this stems from the the scene before where Gray tells Erza that she would have to cut him down to get him to leave the island. When she agrees to help he's like amazed… she can be compassionate, and kind, and she really cares about him. That's the start for them, I think.

- During the ToH arc, there's the obvious "Erza needs to go back to Fairy Tail in order to avoid seeing those tears again" scene which is super sweet and it owns my heart and soul tbh. BUT HEAR ME OUT! That scene is so much more than just a cute shipping moment.

- Erza was a child slave. Gray saw his parents murdered, and then his adoptive mother too. They both have survivors guilt, they both struggle with walking in the light, and out of everyone in the guild they are the only person who understand this; nobody else feels responsible for the deaths of other people that they love, so can't really comprehend the emotional impact that it would have. Gray survived Galuna, and he was determined to show Erza that she would survive this, too. The fact that it was Natsu who had that scene with her was super bittersweet for me, because he didn't understand the emotional significance, but it was still one of my favourite manga moments so uhh

- Besides that, we can't forget that Gray only willingly admitted that Erza was stronger because he saw her cry. He tried to fight her multiple times a day because he could not cope with his own trauma, but she brought him out of that, allowed him to let someone else in. He had Cana, but not he also had someone who understood and like… it meant everything to him.

- They're bond, because of all of this, is incredible, and the fact that Mashima just threw it under a bus is so frustrating. The last significant moment we had for them was on tenrou, and that too was bittersweet, because it also marked the downward spiral of Juvia's character, but that… is a whole other rant.

- Their faith in each other rivals no others, and it should have been developed, could have shown them grow with one another, combating their anxieties and moving forward together, platonically or romantically.

- TL;DR: Gray and Erza had the opportunity to be one of the best developed friendships and/or one of the healthiest relationships in the entire series. Their potential was wasted, thrown away completely, and it fucking sucks. I wanted more for them, and I'm glad to see that there's still a part of the fandom willing to fight for what should have been.

This fanzine has my unconditional support, and if you need anything else from me then please do not hesitate to message me on my main @gaymirajane :)

Private Detective Erza Scarlet

by sorryformyfangirlscreams

June 27, 2008. Friday morning, Chief Makarov of the Magnolia Police Department flung open the door of the office, startling everyone working inside. His co-workers eyed his brawny stature – a 55-year old man with a crew cut for his almost gray hair. Gritted teeth were dirty yellow from all the cigars he'd been smoking early in the morning. Wrinkled were his white dress shirt and black tie as he stomped his way to a nearby desk before throwing down a document-filled folder with a great *thump* and glaring at each face his eyes laid upon, which made everyone uneasy. He truly had the appearance of a man with authority.

"There's been another missing child reported last night, resulting in five kids gone these past two weeks. Then that egotistical grandson of mine, Dreyar, pulled out from the case as the leading detective because of the pressure from the media!" Makarov fumed with anger.

No sound peeped out from the individuals in the office. Grinding his teeth, he crossed his buff, hairy arms over his chest. Men and women were avoiding his lethal gaze as it slowly scanned the room. He knew--they all knew--that their families had been praying each passing day and night that their daughters were safe and alive! Bad news was something he wouldn't ever want to deliver to them or to any person hoping for their loved one to still be alive. Makarov sighed. *Are there any more surprises?*

"So you need a new leading investigator on the case?"

The chief tried to pinpoint who the voice belonged to. Whoever that man was certainly had a tone that was almost too high-pitched to be even considered as a male's. Suddenly, a hand shot right up in the air, appearing within his vision.

"Over here, Chief. I'll do it."

It was a woman. Some individuals murmured in the office. He uncrossed his arms and placed them on his hips, interested in the turn of events. Putting down her hand, she stood up and everyone, including Makarov, examined her from head to toe. Upon her young face were delicate features as if she had never picked a fight with anyone her entire life. Her red tresses were neatly tied into a bun. What indeed staggered them was her slightly muscular build. *Impressive.* However, it took a great deal to convince the Chief. Never in his entire career of working in the police department had they ever let a woman lead a serious and major case like this.

"Oh? You're the newbie, right?" said Makarov in a mocking tone. "And what's your name?"

Taking a couple of steps forward, the woman confidently answered, "Private Investigator Erza Scarlet, Chief." The title stunned Makarov;

it wasn't everyday that people heard it carried by a lady.

As soon as she finished her introduction, everyone turned their attention to the door that swung open once again. A tall, jet-black haired young man entered the office. He wore the classic investigator uniform of a white dress shirt with an empty holster and black slacks. He looked around the room, slightly confused at the scene, before shifting his eyes to the Chief.

"I got your text message, Chief, and came here as fast as I can. Now, what's the urgent matter that we need to discuss?" he asked.

"Oh, Gray Fullbuster, what nice timing you have… Come here and meet the newbie of MPD, Private Investigator Erza Scarlet." Makarov did not look directly at the newly arrived individual when he answered.

The 55-year-old man stepped to the side in order for the two to clearly see each other and be acquainted. Like the Chief, Gray's eyes widened in shock at the woman standing before him for two reasons. One, the lofty title was with a woman that looked about his age. A high achievement for someone in their twenties. And two, *my oh my* was she gorgeous. He was willing to bet that crooks were just surrendering themselves to her upon seeing that stern expression on her face. If looks could kill, they would be stabbed to death with numerous imaginary daggers. Fullbuster formed an amused smile on his face as he remembered her surname. *Scarlet, huh?*

"Like your hair?" Gray thought out loud. He mentally cursed at himself right after. This wouldn't exactly have been the first time he'd been a weirdo in front of beautiful women.

As if Erza read his previous thought, she quickly replied, "Yes. A bit comical, isn't it? Well, it's nice meeting you, but I need to speak with Chief."

Determined, Erza walked up to the man, the eyes of her co-workers following the movement until she was about a meter away from the Chief. "Sir, I have studied intently for four years in complex criminal psychology and justice where I graduated as top student of my class. I also have additional years in learning forensics; I think I am the best candidate here for this case." Erza declared.

Makarov was taken aback, the corner of his lip twitching. *The nerve of this girl.*

She further persisted, "I have also worked with a few cases with some of the long-time officers here, and I have received nothing but positive comments from them. Because of my attributes and abilities, they see promise in me, Chief."

"What makes you think I'd hand you the case just like that? What's your drive, Ms. Sca—?"

"Learning the history of the department during the three weeks I've worked here, I've noticed that no woman has ever managed a major case."

There was a suprise after surprise for the Chief and everyone else. Gray's interest in her grew more and more as nobody ever talked that way to Makarov other than his grandson, and he only met her minutes ago. *I like the nerve of this girl.*

Silence still ensued as the two wouldn't back down from one another. Making her move, Erza smiled, "I want to be the first; the first woman to take an important case like this and solve it. I want to be an advocate for my

gender, which is always seen as inferior to men. Disregarded in their careers, women do not have a voice to speak out with. So a woman is speaking right now, and I say we are all equal. Just as those missing children, we deserve honesty, justice and goodness in this world."

Everybody in the room remained quiet as they stared at the redhead. People were motionless as well. Dead silence was almost unbearable until someone at the back stood up.

"There's hope with the lady, Chief. Let her take the case." a woman exclaimed. Then, a series of applauses and *'yeahs'* followed.

Erza looked behind her, shocked by the sudden support of her co-workers. Most of them were up on their feet, clapping. Some were even howling. Overwhelmed with the impact of her words, she threw her fists in the air. Heart pounding against her chest at the amazing sight.

"Ahem!"

Everyone in the room abruptly quieted and turned their heads to Makarov, who had the same stern expression as before. Men and women returned to their seats. Erza waited for his response as do her co-workers. Sighing in defeat, he said, "Contact Detectives Dragneel and Heartfilia on this case and start another investigation tomorrow. Do not let me down."

Erza grinned brightly at him. She knew this was a great step to justice for the missing girls and for working women; believing in tomorrow was a way to change. Chief Makarov picked up the folder from the desk and handed it to her. She gladly took it, nodding in thanks.

"Oh, and Detective Fullbuster will also be joining the investigation, so better be discussing what's inside the case file with him now. You're working with the department's best officers, P.I. Scarlet. Do not let me down," he said before exiting the room.

The private detective wasted no time and went to her desk. Upon sitting in her chair and placing the folder down, an outstretched hand came into her view. "I didn't really introduce myself formally to you, Miss Scarlet. I'm Gray Fullbuster."

She looked up and saw her new companion on the case standing by her desk. At a closer look, she saw that he was a man just around her age. He had quite the athletic build and… had a scar on the left side of his forehead. Erza thought it probably came from one of his messy encounters with a felon possessing a weapon.

Meanwhile, Gray felt uneasy that Erza was staring so intently at him. Did he say something stupid? Was she far-sighted and couldn't see him? Was he really so unattractive that she didn't want to communicate with him at all?

He quietly cleared his throat. "Um, well, the Chief did introduce you to me, so I understand if you don't want to do that anymore." He was about to withdraw his hand when she suddenly took it with an almost iron grip and lightly shook it.

"Nice to formally meet you, Detective Gray Fullbuster. Forgive me for staring and making you uncomfortable," Erza said, letting go of her co-worker's hand before returning her eyes to the contents of the folder. He chuckled at her almost robotic tone, and the fact that she even went as far as calling him by his title. She was expressionless and somewhat innocent in a way. Funny how she was just howling with joy earlier, and now she switched to work mode.

You can stare at me anytime.

Gray formed a boyish grin. "No need to call me 'detective', Erza. I want us to be comfortable with each other in order to work well for future cases. Besides, we'd have a cute team name, Scarlet and Gray. Strange that we both have colors in our names. Like we're made to be together. I-I mean, work together."

Good thing the redhead was too busy looking at the file while he was blabbering, especially during that last part. He felt his ears burn and turn to the color of her hair from embarrassment. *You better shut up now, Fullbuster.*

"Gray, do you have the contact numbers of Detectives Dragneel and Heartfilia?" Erza inquired, picking up a photo of a little girl carrying a cat in her hands.

He nodded as he dug his phone out of his pocket. "I'll text Natsu and Lucy about the new investigation."

"Thank you. Now, let's read through the case file."

"Yes, ma'am. And after looking through it, we could head to a cafe just two blocks from here for lunch. People say they serve the best strawberry cake in the area."

The man could have sworn he saw sparkles in her big, chestnut eyes as she looked up at him. "Yes, I've visited Fairy Berry for almost 5 years now. I guarantee that their strawberry cake is the most delicious one I've tasted among other strawberry cakes in Magnolia," she declared with a hint of enthusiasm in her voice.

Erza smiled at her co-worker, resulting in Gray's cheeks turning a light shade of red. This woman, who he had initially thought was probably a robot, liked eating sweets. A while ago, she had been smiling about finally gaining equality for the social injustice in the MPD. Next, she's smiling about strawberry cake.

God, that's adorable.

"It'll be my treat to celebrate your triumph earlier, and you being the newfound hope for the case."

Of course, no one would decline an offer of free food.

"Oh, I couldn't possibly say no to that." *Nailed it!* "Thank you, Gray. I hope that we make a great team and solve this case," she answered without a second thought. Once again, she smiled. This one was softer than the last.

Gray couldn't help but grin as well. That damn smile was so contagious. Within minutes of meeting her, he'd already developed a crush on her like a kid in high school. She was literally the embodiment of beauty and brains.

"Well, that settles it. So let's open up the file."

"Right. I believe that we could save those little girls," agreed Erza with determination as held the folder tight.

Fullbuster only stared at the redhead, still amazed at her unwavering courage. The male detective could definitely sense that this woman would solve this case. During their discussion, Gray held his wallet. He hoped that he had enough cash to accommodate the amount of slices she'd be having for lunch. He also hoped that Natsu and Lucy wouldn't show up. They'd be frantic if they knew that he was making moves on the new private investigator.

Pocky Fun

by sorryformyfangirlscreams

Erza hesitantly took the chocolate-covered biscuit from its box and put the end between her front teeth, shaking slightly. Curse that idiotic bet that the ice mage created a while ago. She could have won easily if her deck had her lucky card: the Queen of Hearts. Sadly, she wouldn't be able to witness Natsu and Gray doing this dumb bet instead of her and —

"You ready, Erza? Remember, no hitting~"

Titania let out a low growl as a reply to the cocky Gray Fullbuster before her. With his hands on his hips and triumphant grin on his face (most likely due to the fact he wouldn't be smooching the dragon slayer), he stared at Erza's blushing face.

As much as she wanted to call quits on the turn of events, the mighty Titania should not back down from challenges, especially a ridiculous bet such as this. But then again.. her recent growing attraction to the ice mage had become almost unbearable. Ever since the war ended, Team Natsu became even closer, especially Gray and Erza. Though, it was still an unexplainable thing to the redhead. Unexplainable on how she suddenly found it difficult to keep herself composed in front of her best friend.

He chuckled at her defeated form. *Sorry, Erza, I had to take that lucky card out of your hands so I wouldn't be locking lips with flamebrain.*

Gray then placed his fingers under her chin, lifting it so he can look at her ever-cute, red face. Tracing them gently from her jawline, he entangled them into her scarlet locks and snaked his free hand around her waist. *Thank Mavis she's not wearing armor today.*

Slowly, he opened his mouth and lightly placed the other end of the pocky stick between his teeth. The ice mage had his seductive gaze on the now stiff Erza, who was profusely blushing. She quickly bit on her end and waited for him to do the same. Erza didn't want to admit it, but she was kind of excited as to what anticipates her at the other end. *Would Gray's lips feel soft? Would it be cold like his magic? Or would it be warm like his hands around he–ah! Stop with such thoughts, Erza!*

Meanwhile, Gray bit his end, eager to close the gap between them. Each bite gradually reduced the sweet treat. It seemed like hours for the scarlet-haired maiden, almost as if the stick was 50 feet long. Gray's face was dangerously close now.

Okay, Erza, you can do it. Just give him a quick peck on the lips and walk away.

As she was about to bring an end to this stupid shenanigan, Gray immediately closed the gap, pressing his body against hers with the last tiny biscuit still intact in his mouth. She gasped into the kiss, closing her eyes tight. The ice mage peeked through one eye to see the redhead's reaction. He could've sworn she leaned more into the kiss for a fraction of a second. Smirking, he pushed the pocky stick into her mouth using his tongue and had seconds of exploring the sweet environment. He soon tasted how the chocolate now mixed with her strawberry lip gloss.

Erza could not escape due to his hand being placed firmly behind her head. Seconds after, she lost air and pushed Gray with all her strength. With red-tinted cheeks, both were gasping for breath. They heard Natsu and Happy howling and teasing in the background, while Lucy and Wendy were probably too dumbfounded to make a sound.

"There.. I did.. your.. stupid bet.." Erza managed to say. She could feel her heart hammering against her chest. Brown crumbs were visible on the corner of her lips, tempting Gray to lick all of it clean. Keeping a sensual stare, he took a long look at the flushed Erza.

"Hmph? Who said we're done?" The black-haired man smirked before grabbing the pocky box and pulled another chocolate-covered stick out.

"That was just one of many."

And he could've sworn the blushing redhead was staring at his lips before he said that.